JUNE

Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

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RED STAR MAGAZINE JUNE

Burn, Witch, Burn!

A FANTASY OF DEVIL DOLLS BY

A. Merritt

Beyond the Pole

MYSTERY OF THE HORROR-DIRIGIBLE

16 MORE PAGES

Virgil Finlay

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Publishers' Announcement!

In response to reader demand FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES with this issue becomes a monthly magazine—on sale the 15th of each month, instead of every two months, as heretofore.

Sixteen more pages have been added and this issue contains two very famous fantastic mysteries of novel and novelet length. Together with the trimmed edges and an increase in illustrations asked for by the readers, the publishers feel that the enlarged form of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES accomplishes the fulfillment of the wishes of our many faithful followers.

Simultaneously the publishers announce a new 25c price, in keeping with added improvements and costs of manufacture. The increased price is the result of a choice between retaining the old price with a reduced size and quality, faced with increasing costs of production, and the new and enlarged form. It seemed the best way to give our Fantastic readers modern improvements and more of their favorite stories and stronger stories whose length will be accommodated by the increased number of pages. We feel that rather than sacrifice quality and size to meet increased costs our readers would prefer an enlarged magazine.

The editors pledge you their best efforts to make this magazine worth far more than the price. The next issue will be dated July, on sale May 15th.

Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

(Combined with Fantastic Novels Magazine)

Vol. IV JUNE, 1942 No. 2

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Complete Book-Length Novel

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The victims of that strange fate had faces stamped with horror and a devilish glee—was it Black Magic, or a murder art that science could fight?

This story appeared serially in The Argosy, beginning October 22 1932

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Loathed by mankind, he cried out to the creatures of the water-world

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The Television Alibi

From Detective Fiction Weekly, July 20, 1935

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The Readers' Viewpoint 139

This magazine is now published once a month!

The July issue will be on sale May 15th.

A RED STAR *Magazine*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher. 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

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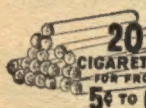

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PETER RICHARDS

In the May issue of

ARGOSY

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Just a month or so before, t' is same LaSalle representative had enrolled for the very same training another young man (let's call him Bert) recently arrived from Europe and then working as an office boy in the same town at $15 a week. Bert orked enthusiastically, aggressively in his spare time on his study.

A year later our representative was asked, as they so often are, to recommend a successor to the chief accountant of Jim's company, a succ sor to the man under whom Jim worked. He recommended Bert and Bert was hired—as Jim's boss and at a salary considerably larger than Jim received. Four months later, Bert was made comptroller and given another salary increase.

A month later, Jim enrolled for the training which he had turned down a year before and he has since had a salary raise. He had been badly disappointed but he saw the point. He decided that he would not make the same mistake twice.

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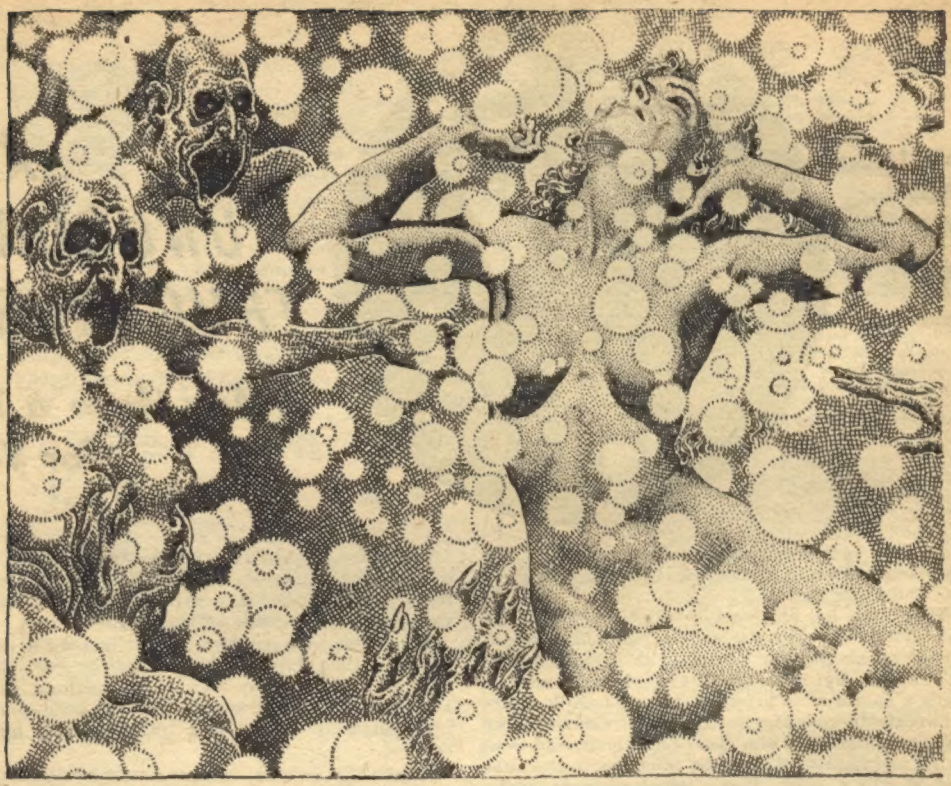

Burn, Witch, Burn!

By A. MERRITT

In collaboration with Dr. Lowell

CHAPTER I

THE UNKNOWN DEATH

I AM a medical man specializing in neurology and diseases of the brain. My peculiar field is abnormal psychology, and in that field I am recognized as an expert. I am closely connected with two of the foremost hospitals in New York. I have received many honors in this country and abroad, and one of my books upon schizoids—that is, disintegrated, or as it is loosely termed, multiple personalities—is an outstanding reference book for students of this phenomenon.

Lowell is not my real name; it is necessary that I appear in this recital under a pseudonym. Why this should be will become increasingly apparent as my recital progresses. I call attention to my professional standing only because I wish to show that I was fully competent to observe, and am fully competent to bring clear scientific judgment upon, the occurrences to be set forth. The same necessity which causes me to conceal my

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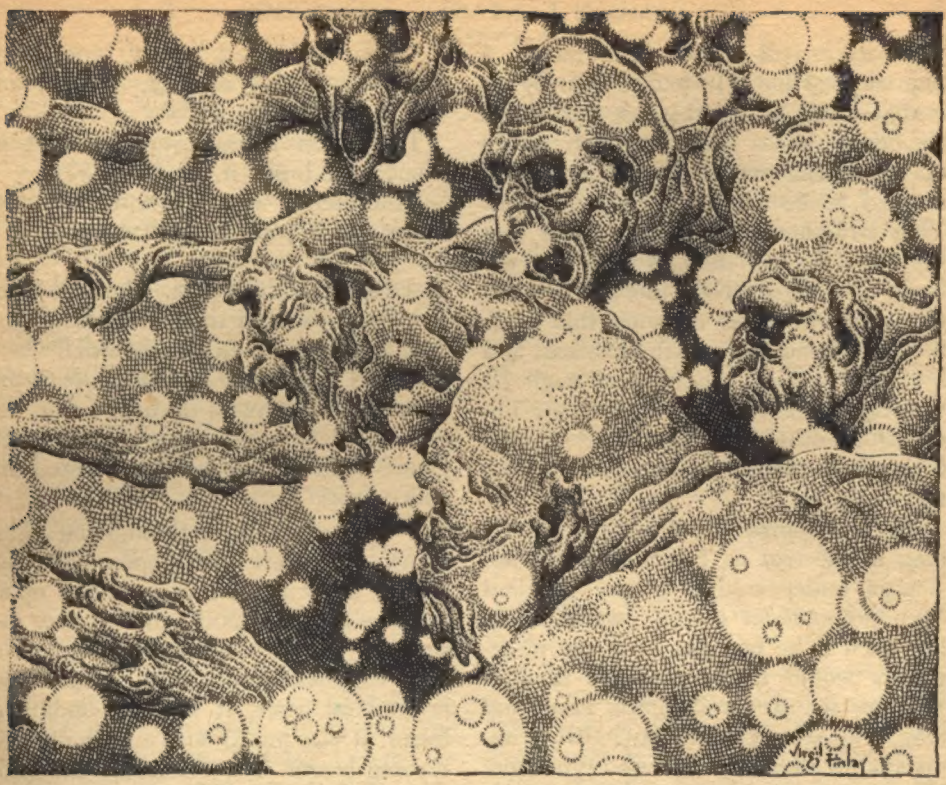

What terrible power did Madame Mandilip wield that gave evil life to her dolls?

name forces me to conceal that of the hospital where some of them took place.

Yet I have the strongest feeling that the facts which in my case-book are grouped under the heading of "The Dolls of Madame Mandilip" should be classified, set down in orderly sequence and made known. I could do this, of course, in a report to one of my medical societies. I am too well aware of the manner with which it would be received by my colleagues, and with what disapproving suspicion they would regard me; so many of the observations run counter to accepted mental pictures of cause and effect.

But may there not be other causes than those we now acknowledge? May there not be a wisdom, a science, immeasurably ancient and lost now to all but a few; a secret knowledge which has been carried down through the ages; not to be judged or measured by the standards of our present beliefs?

Enough of preamble. I begin where the dark wisdom, if that it was, first cast its shadow upon me.

THE clock struck one as I walked up the hospital steps. Ordinarily I would have been in bed and asleep, but there was a case in which I was much interested, and Braile, my assistant, had telephoned me of certain developments which I wished to observe. It was a night in early November. I paused for a moment at the top of the steps to look at the brilliancy of the stars. As I did so, an automobile drew up at the entrance to the hospital.

The car was large and luxurious, of foreign make. As I stood, wondering

what its arrival at that hour meant, a man slipped out. He looked sharply up and down the deserted street, then threw the door wide open. Another man emerged. The two of them stooped and seemed to be fumbling around inside. They straightened, and then I saw that they had locked their arms about the body of a third. They moved forward, not supporting but carrying this other man. His head hung upon his breast and his body swung limply as though he were only semiconscious, or wholly unconscious, or dead. A fourth had stepped from the automobile and was following them closely.

As they approached I recognized this man in the rear as Julian Ricori, a notorious underworld chieftain. He had been pointed out to me several times, but even if he had not been the newspapers would have made me familiar with his features and figure. Lean and long, with silvery white hair; always immaculately dressed; a leisured type from his outward seeming, rather than leader of such activities as those with which he was accused. I had been standing in the shadow, unnoticed. I stepped out. Instantly the burdened pair stopped, swiftly as hunting hounds. Their free hands dropped into the pockets of their coats. There was menace in that move.

"I am Dr. Lowell," I said hastily. "Connected with the hospital. Come right along."

They did not answer; their gaze did not waver from me; nor did they move. Ricori stepped in front of them. His hands were also in his pockets. He looked me over, then nodded to the others; I felt the tension relax immediately.

"I know you, doctor," he said pleasantly, in oddly precise English. "But that was quite a chance you took. If I might advise you, it is not well to move so quickly when those come whom you do not know, and at night—not in this town."

"But," I said, "I do know you, Mr. Ricori."

"Then," he smiled, faintly, "your judgment was doubly at fault. And my advice doubly pertinent."

There was an awkward moment of silence. He broke it.

"And being who I am, I shall feel better inside your doors than outside."

I OPENED the doors. The two men passed through them with their burden, and after them Ricori and I. Once within, I gave way to my professional instincts and stepped up to the man the two were carrying. They shot a quick glance at Ricori. He nodded. I raised the man's head.

A little shock went through me. The man's eyes were wide open. He was neither dead nor unconscious. But upon his face was the most extraordinary expression of terror I had ever seen in a long experience with sane, insane and borderland cases. It was not undiluted terror. It was mixed with an equally disturbing horror. The eyes, blue and with distended pupils, were like exclamation points to the face. They stared up at me, through me and beyond me. And still they seemed to be looking inward—as though whatever nightmare vision they were seeing was, at the same time, both behind and before them.

"Exactly!" Ricori had been watching me closely. "Dr. Lowell, what could it be that my friend has seen—or has been given—that could make him appear so? I am most anxious to learn. I am willing to spend much money to learn. I wish him cured, yes—but I will be frank with you, Dr. Lowell. I would give the last penny of what I have for certainty that those who did this to him could not do the same thing to me—could not make me as he is, could not make me see what he is seeing, or make me feel what he is feeling."

At my signal, orderlies had come up. They took the patient and laid him on a stretcher. By this time the resident physician had appeared. Ricori touched my elbow.

"I know a great deal about you, Dr. Lowell," he said. "I would like you to take full charge of the case."

I considered this.

"Could you," he went on—"could you drop everything else? Spend every minute on this case? Bring in any others you wish to consult—don't think of expense—"

"A moment, Mr. Ricori," I broke in. "What you suggest is impossible. I have other patients who cannot be neglected. But I will give all the time I can spare, and so will my assistant, Dr. Braile. And your friend will be constantly under observation here by people who have my complete confidence. If you wish me to take the case under those conditions, I will."

To that he acquiesced, though I could see he was not entirely satisfied. I had the patient taken to an isolated private room, and then went through the necessary hospital formalities. Ricori gave the patient's name as Thomas Peters, asserted that he knew of no close relatives, had himself recorded as Peters' nearest friend, assumed all responsibility, and taking out a roll of currency skimmed a thousand dollar bill from it, passing it to the desk to defray the "preliminary costs."

I asked Ricori if he would like to be present at my examination. He said that he would. He spoke to his two men, and they took positions at each side of the hospital doors; on guard. Ricori and I went to the room assigned Peters. The orderlies had stripped him, and he lay upon the adjustable cot, covered by a sheet. Braile, for whom I had sent, was bending over the patient, intent upon his eyes and plainly puzzled. I saw with satisfaction that Nurse Walters, an extraordinarily capable and conscientious young woman, had been assigned to the case. Braile looked up at me. He said:

"Obviously some drug."

"Maybe," I answered. "But if so—then a drug I have never encountered. Look at his eyes—"

I closed Peters' lids. As soon as I had lifted my fingers they began to rise, slowly, until they were again wide open. Several times I tried to shut them. Always they fluttered open, the terror, the horror in them, undiminished.

I began my examination. The entire body was limp, muscles and joints. It was as flaccid, the simile came to me, as a doll. It was as though every motor nerve had gone out of business. Yet there were none of the familiar symptoms of paralysis. Nor did the body respond to any sensory stimuli, although I struck down into the nerve trunks. The only reaction I could obtain was a slight contraction of the dilated pupils under strongest light.

HOSKINS, the pathologist, came in to take his samples for blood tests. When he had drawn what he wanted, I went over the body minutely. I could find not a single puncture, wound, bruise, or abrasion. Peters was hairy. With Ricori's permission I had him shaved clean—chest, shoulders, legs, even the head. I found nothing to indicate that a drug might have been given him by hypodermic. I had the stomach emptied and took specimens from the excretory organs, including the skin.

I examined the membranes of nose and throat; they seemed healthy and normal, nevertheless I had smears taken from them. The blood pressure was low, the temperature slightly subnormal; but that might mean nothing. I gave an injection of adrenalin. There was absolutely no reaction from it. That might mean much.

"Poor devil," I said to myself. "I'm going to try to kill that nightmare for you, at any rate."

I gave him a minimum hypo of morphine. It might have been water for all the good it did. I gave him all I dared. His eyes remained open, terror and horror undiminished. And pulse and respiration unchanged!

Ricori had watched all these operations with intense interest. I had done all

I could for the time, and told him so rather reluctantly.

"I can do no more," I said, "until I receive the reports of the specimens. Frankly, I am at sea. I know of no disease nor drug which would produce conditions such as are present in this case."

"But Dr. Braile," he said, "mentioned a drug—"

"A suggestion only," interposed Braile hastily. "Like Dr. Lowell, I know of no drug causing such symptoms."

Ricori glanced at Peters' face and shivered.

"Now," I said, "I must ask you some questions. Has this man been ill? If so, has he been under medical care? If he has not actually been ill, has he spoken of any discomfort? Or have you noticed anything unusual in his manner or behavior?"

"No, to all questions," he answered. "Peters has been in closest touch with me for the past week. He has not been ailing in the least. Tonight we were talking in my apartment and eating a late and light dinner. He was in high spirits. In the middle of a word, he stopped, half-turned his head as though listening; then slipped from his chair to the floor. When I bent over him he was as you see him now. That was precisely half after midnight. I brought him here at once."

"Well," I said, "that at least gives us the exact time of the seizure. There is no use of your remaining, Mr. Ricori, unless you wish."

He studied his hands a few moments, rubbing the carefully manicured nails.

"Dr. Lowell," he said at last, "if this man dies without your discovering what killed him, I shall pay you the customary fees and the hospital the customary charges and no more. If he dies and you make this discovery after his death, I will give a hundred thousand dollars to any charity you name. But if you make the discovery before he dies, and restore him to health—I will give you the same sum."

We stared at him, and then as the significance of this remarkable offer sank in, I found it hard to curb my anger.

"Ricori," I said, "you and I live in different worlds, therefore I answer you politely although I find it difficult. I will do all in my power to find out what is the matter with your friend and to cure him. I would do that if he and you were paupers. I am interested in him only as a problem which challenges me as a physician. It challenges me so strongly that I expect to devote myself solely to him for an indefinite number of hours. But I am not interested in you in the slightest. Nor in your money. Nor in your offer. Consider it definitely rejected. Do you thoroughly understand that?"

TO MY astonishment he betrayed no resentment.

"So much so that more than ever I wish you to take full charge," he said.

"Very well. Now where can I get you if I want to bring you here quickly?"

"With your permission," he answered, "I should like to have—well, representatives in this room at all times. There will be two of them. If you want me, tell them—and I will soon be here."

I laughed at that, but he did not.

"You have reminded me," he said, "that we live in different worlds. You take your precautions to go safely in your world—and I order my life to minimize the perils of mine. Not for a moment would I presume to advise you how to walk among the dangers of your laboratory, Dr. Lowell. I have the counterparts of those dangers. *Bene*—I guard against them as best I can."

It was a most irregular request, of course. But I found myself close to liking Ricori just then, and saw clearly his point of view. He knew that and pressed the advantage.

"The men will be no bother," he said. "They will not interfere in any way with you. They will not speak unless they are spoken to. If what I suspect to be true is

true, they will be a protection for you and your aids as well. But they, and those who relieve them, must stay in the room night and day. If Peters is taken from the room they must accompany him—no matter where it is that he is taken."

"I can arrange it," I said. Then, at his request, I sent an orderly down to the doors. He returned with one of the men Ricori had left on guard. Ricori whispered to him, and he went out. In a little while two other men came up. In the meantime I had explained the peculiar situation to the resident and the superintendent and secured the necessary permission for their stay. The two men were well dressed and polite, and of a singularly tight lipped and cold eyed alertness. I looked at Ricori and smiled.

"What amuses you, doctor?" he asked.

"I'm thinking that our guests are as expert with a gun as I with a scalpel," I answered bluntly.

"Your world and mine," he murmured.

One of the men shot a glance at Peters. "Lord!" he muttered. His face whitened.

The room was a corner one with two windows, one opening out on the Drive, the other on the side street. Besides these there were no outer openings except the door to the hall; the private bathroom being inclosed and have no windows. Ricori and the two inspected the room minutely, keeping away, I noticed, from the windows. He asked me then if the room could be darkened. Much interested, I nodded.

The lights being turned off, the three went to the windows, opened them and carefully scrutinized the six-story sheer drop to both streets. On the side of the Drive there was nothing but the open space above the park. On the other was a church.

"It is at this side you must watch," I heard Ricori say; he pointed to the church. "You can turn the lights on now, doctor."

He started toward the door, then turned and held out his hand. I took it and shook it heartily.

"I'll do the best I can, Ricori, and I'll call in the best help."

He nodded.

"I have many enemies, Dr. Lowell. Peters was my right hand. If it was one of these enemies who struck him, he did it to weaken me. Or perhaps because he had not the opportunity to strike at me. I look at Peters, and for the first time in my life I, Ricori, am afraid. I have no wish to be the next. I have no wish to—look into hell!"

I grunted at that; he had put so aptly what I had felt and had not formulated into words. He looked sharply at me.

"Taken by the nape of the neck like a puppy and my face thrust through a window of hell!" he said.

He dropped my hand. He started to open the door. He hesitated.

"One thing more. If there should be any telephone calls inquiring as to Peters' condition, let one of these men, or their reliefs, answer. If any should come in person making inquiry, allow them to come up—but if there are more than one let only one come at a time. If any should appear asserting that they are relatives, again let these men meet and question them."

By this time I had made up my mind to carry on the matter in what I might call full partnership with this meticulously spoken, meticulously mannered leader of what is termed the underworld. I was not only singularly interested, I was singularly fascinated.

"Ricori," I held out my hand again, impulsively, "I'll do all I can for you."

He gripped my hand, then opened the door of the room. Another pair of the efficient retainers were awaiting him at the threshold. They swung in before and behind him. As he walked away I saw that he was crossing himself, vigorously.

I closed the door and went back into the room. I looked down on Peters.

IF I HAD been religious, I too would have been doing some crossing.

The expression on Peters' face had changed. The terror and horror were gone. He still seemed to be looking both beyond me and into himself, but it was a look of evil expectancy—so evil that involuntarily I shot a glance over my shoulder to see what ugly thing might be creeping upon me.

There was nothing. One of Ricori's gunmen sat in the corner of the window, in the shadow, watching the parapet of the church roof opposite; the other sat stolidly at the door.

Braile and Nurse Walters were at the other side of the bed. Their eyes were fixed with a horrified fascination on Peters' face. And then I saw Braile turn his head and stare about the room—as I had.

Suddenly Peters' eyes seemed to focus; to become aware of the three of us; to become aware of the whole room. They flashed with an unholy glee. That glee was not maniacal—it was diabolical. That is the only word for it—diabolical. It was the look of a devil long exiled from his well-behaved hell, and suddenly summoned to return. Or was it like the glee of some devil sent hurtling out of his hell to work his will upon whom he might? Very well do I know how fantastic, how utterly unscientific, are such comparisons. Yet not otherwise can I describe the strange change that occurred.

Then, abruptly as the closing of a camera shutter, that expression fled and the old terror and horror came back. I gave an involuntary gasp of relief, for it was precisely as though some evil presence had withdrawn. The nurse was trembling; Braile said to me in rather a strained voice:

"How about another hypodermic?"

"No," I said. "I want to study the progress of this—whatever it is. I'm going down to the laboratory. Watch him closely until I return."

I went down to the laboratory. Hoskins looked up at me.

"Nothing wrong, so far. Remarkable health, I'd say. Of course all the results I've had are the simpler tests."

I nodded. I had an uncomfortable feeling that the other tests would show nothing either. And I had been more shaken than I would have cared to confess by those alterations of hellish fear, hellish expectancy and hellish glee in Peters' face and eyes. The whole case troubled me; gave me a nightmarish feeling of standing outside some door which it was vitally important to open, and to which not only did I have no key but of which I couldn't find the keyhole. I have found that concentration upon microscopic work often permits me to think more freely upon problems. So I took a few smears of Peters' blood and began to study them, not with any expectation of finding anything, but in order to relieve the tension from another part of my brain.

I was on my fourth slide when suddenly, with a distinct shock, I realized that I was looking at the incredible. As I perfunctorily moved the slide, a white corpuscle slid into the field of vision. Within that corpuscle was a spark of phosphorescence, shining out like a tiny lamp! I thought at first that it was some effect of the light, but no manipulation of the illumination changed that spark. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. I called Hoskins. "Tell me if you see something peculiar in there," I said.

He peered into the microscope; I saw him start, then shift the light as I had.

"What do you see, Hoskins?"

He said, still staring through the lens:

"A leucocyte, inside of which is what seems like a globe of phosphorescence. Its glow is neither dimmed when I turn on the full illumination, nor is it increased when I lessen it. In all except the ingested globe the corpuscle seems normal."

"And all of which," I said, "is quite impossible."

"Quite," he agreed, straightening. "Yet there it is!"

Hastily, I transferred the slide to the micro-manipulator, hoping to isolate the corpuscle, and set my eyes again to the lens. Luck was with me. I found the corpuscle and touched it with the tip of the manipulating needle. At that instant of contact the corpuscle seemed to burst. The globe of phosphorescence appeared to flatten, and something like a miniature flash of heat-lightning ran over the visible portion of the slide. And that was all—the phosphorescence was gone.

WE PREPARED and examined slide after slide. Twice more we found the lights, and each time with the same result. The bursting corpuscle, the strange flicker of faint luminosity—then nothing.

The laboratory phone rang. Hoskins answered.

"It's Braile. He wants you—quick."

"Keep after it, Hoskins," I said, and hastened to Peters' room. Entering, I saw Nurse Walters, face chalk-white, eyes closed, standing with her back turned to the bed. Braile was leaning over the patient, stethoscope to his heart. I looked at Peters, and stood stock still, something like a touch of unreasoning panic at my own heart.

Upon his face was the look of devilish expectancy, but intensified. As I looked it gave way to the diabolic joy, and that, too, was intensified. The face held it for not many seconds. Back came the expectancy—then on its heels once more the unholy glee. The two expressions alternated, rapidly. They flickered over Peters' face like—like the flickers of the tiny lights within the corpuscles of his blood—

Braile spoke to me through stiff lips:

"His heart stopped three minutes ago. He ought to be dead—yet look—"

The body of Peters stretched and stiffened. A sound came from his lips—a chuckling sound; low yet singularly penetrating, inhuman, the chattering laughter of a devil. The gunman at the window leaped to his feet, his chair going over with a crash. The laughter choked and died away, and the body of Peters lay limp.

I heard the door open, and Ricori's voice:

"How is he, Dr. Lowell? I could not sleep—" He saw Peters' face.

"Mother of the Saviour!" I heard him whisper, and saw him drop to his knees.

I saw him dimly—for I could not take my eyes from Peters' face. It was the face of a grinning, triumphant fiend—all humanity wiped from it—the face of a demon straight out of some mad mediæval painter's hell. The blue eyes, now utterly malignant, glared at Ricori.

And as I looked, the dead hands moved; slowly the arms bent up from the elbows, the fingers contracting like claws; the dead body itself began to stir beneath the covers—

At that the spell of nightmare dropped from me; for the first time in hours I was on ground that I knew. It was the *rigor mortis*, the stiffening of death—but setting in more quickly and proceeding at a rate I had never known.

I stepped forward and drew the lids down over the glaring eyes, covering the dreadful face.

I looked at Ricori. He was still on his knees, crossing himself and praying. And kneeling beside him, arm around his shoulders, was Nurse Walters, and she, too, was praying.

Somewhere a clock struck five.

CHAPTER II

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

I OFFERED to go home with Ricori, and somewhat to my surprise he accepted with alacrity. The man was pitiably shaken. We rode silently, the tight-lipped gunmen alert. Peters' face kept floating before me.

I gave Ricori a strong sedative, and left him sleeping, his men on guard. I had told him that I meant to make a complete autopsy.

Returning to the hospital in his car, I found the body of Peters had been taken to the mortuary. *Rigor mortis* Braile told me, had been complete in less than an hour—an astonishingly short time. I made the necessary arrangements for the autopsy, and took Braile home with me to snatch a few hours' sleep. It is difficult to convey by words the peculiarly unpleasant impression the whole occurrence had made upon me. I can only say that I was as grateful for Braile's company as he seemed to be for mine.

When I awoke the impression still lingered, though not so strongly. It was about two when we began the autopsy. I lifted the sheet from Peters' body with noticeable hesitation. I stared at his face with amazement. All diabolism had been wiped away. It was serene, unlined—the face of a man who had died peacefully, with no agony either of body or mind. I lifted his hand. It was limp, the whole body flaccid, the *rigor* gone.

It was then, I think, that I first felt full conviction I was dealing with an entirely new, or at least unknown, agency of death, whether microbic or otherwise.

As a rule, the *rigor mortis* does not set in until sixteen to twenty-four hours, depending upon the condition of the patient before death, temperature and a dozen other things. Normally, it does not disappear for forty-eight to seventy-two hours. Usually a rapid setting-in of the stiffening means as rapid a disappearance, and vice versa. Diabetics stiffen quicker than others. A swift brain injury, like shooting, is even swifter.

In this case, the *rigor* had begun instantaneously with death, and must have completed its cycle in the astonishingly short time of less than five hours—for the attendant told me that he had examined the body about ten o'clock and he had thought that stiffening had not yet set in. The face was then as now. He had no knowledge of the case, and had not seen that face as we had when Peters had died.

The results of the autopsy can be told in two sentences. There was no ascertainable reason why Peters could not be alive. And he was dead.

Later, when Hoskins made his reports, both of these utterly conflicting statements continued to be true. There was no reason why Peters should be dead. Yet dead he was. If the enigmatic lights we had observed had anything to do with his death, they left no traces. His organs were perfect, all else as it should have been, indeed an extraordinarily healthy specimen. Nor had Hoskins been able to capture any more of the light-carrying corpuscles after I had left him.

THAT night I framed a short letter describing briefly the symptoms observed in Peters' case, not dwelling upon the changes in expression but referring cautiously to "unusual grimaces" and a "look of intense fear." Braile and I had this manifolded and mailed to every physician in Greater New York. I personally attended to a quiet inquiry to the same effect among the hospitals.

The letters asked if the physicians had treated any patients with similar symptoms, and if so to give particulars, names, addresses, occupations and any characteristic interest under seal, of course, of professional confidence. I flattered myself that my reputation was such that none of those who received the questionnaires would think the request actuated either by idle curiosity or slightest unethical motive.

I received in response seven letters and a personal visit from the writer of one of them. Each letter, except one, gave me in various degrees of medical conservatism the information I had asked. After reading them, there was no question that within six months seven persons of oddly dissimilar characteristics and stations in life had died as had Peters.

Chronologically, the cases were as follows:

May 25; Ruth Bailey, spinster; fifty

years old, moderately wealthy; Social Register and best of reputation; charitable and devoted to children.

June 20; Patrick McIlraine; bricklayer; wife and two children.

August 1; Anita Green; child of eleven; parents in moderate circumstances and well educated.

August 15; Steve Standish; acrobat; thirty; wife and three children.

August 30; John J. Marshall; sixty; banker interested in child welfare.

September 10; Phineas Dimott; thirty-five; trapeze performer; wife and small child.

October 12; Hortense Darnley; about thirty; no occupation.

Their addresses, except two, were widely scattered throughout the city.

Each of the letters noted the sudden onset of *rigor mortis* and its rapid passing. Each of them gave the time of death following the initial seizure as approximately five hours. Five of them referred to the changing expressions which had so troubled me; in the guarded way they did it I read their bewilderment.

"Patient's eyes remained open," recorded the physician in charge of spinster Bailey. "Staring, but gave no sign of recognition of surroundings and failed to focus upon or present any evidence of seeing objects held before them. Expression one of intense terror, giving away toward death to others peculiarly disquieting to observer. The latter intensified after death ensued. *Rigor mortis* complete and dissipated within five hours."

The physician in charge of McIlraine, the bricklayer, had nothing to say about the ante-mortem phenomena, but wrote at some length about the expression of the face after death.

"It had," he reported, "nothing in common with the staring eyes and gaping mouth of the so-called 'Hippocratic countenance,' nor was it in any way the muscular contraction familiarly known as the death grin. There was no suggestion of agony—rather the opposite. I would term the expression one of unusual malice."

The report of the physician who had attended Standish, the acrobat, was perfunctory, but it mentioned that "after patient had apparently died, singularly disagreeable sounds emanated from his throat." I wondered whether these had been the same demonic cachinnations as had come from Peters, and if so I could not wonder at all at my correspondent's reticence concerning them.

I knew the physician who had attended the banker—opinionated, pompous, a perfect doctor of the very rich.

"There can be no mystery as to the cause of death," he wrote. "It was certainly thrombosis, a clot somewhere in the brain. I attach no importance whatever to the facial grimaces, nor to the time element involved in the *rigor*. You know, my dear Lowell," he added, patronizingly, "it is an axiom in forensic medicine that one can prove anything by *rigor mortis*."

I would have liked to have replied that when in doubt thrombosis as a diagnosis was equally useful in covering the ignorance of practitioners, but it would not have punctured his complacency.

The Dimott report was a simple record with no comment whatever upon grimaces or sounds.

BUT the doctor who had attended little Anita had not been so reticent. "The child," he wrote, "had been beautiful. She seemed to suffer no pain, but at the onset of the illness I was shocked by the intensity of terror in her fixed gaze. It was like a waking nightmare—for unquestionably she was conscious until death. Morphine in almost lethal dosage produced no change in this symptom, nor did it seem to have any effect upon heart or respiration. Later the terror disappeared, giving way to other emotions which I hesitate to describe in this report, but will do so in person if you desire. The aspect of the child after death was peculiarly disturbing, but

again I would rather speak than write of that."

There was a hastily scrawled postscript; I could see him hesitating, then giving way at last to the necessity of unburdening his mind, dashing off that postscript and rushing the letter away before he could reconsider—

"I have written that the child was conscious *until death*. What haunts me most is the conviction that she was conscious *after physical death!* Let me talk to you."

I nodded with satisfaction. I had not dared to put that observation down in my questionnaire. And if it had been true of the other cases, as I now believed it must have been, all the doctors except Standish's had shared my conservatism—or timidity. I called little Anita's physician upon the phone at once. He was strongly perturbed. In every detail his case paralleled that of Peters. He kept repeating over and over:

"The child was sweet and good as an angel, and she changed into a devil!"

I promised to keep him apprised of any discoveries I might make, and shortly after our conversation received the visit of the young physician who had attended Hortense Darnley. Dr. Y—, as I shall call him, had nothing to add to the medical aspect other than what I already knew, but his talk suggested the first practical line of approach toward the problem. His office was in the apartment house which had been Hortense Darnley's home. He had been working late, and had been summoned to her apartment about ten o'clock by the woman's maid, a colored girl. He had found the patient lying upon her bed, and had at once been struck by the expression of terror on her face and the extraordinary limpness of her body. He described her as blond, blue-eyed—"the doll type."

A man was in the apartment. He had at first evaded giving his name, saying that he was merely a friend. At first glance, Dr. Y— had thought the woman had been subjected to some violence, but examination revealed no bruises or other injuries. The "friend" had told him they had been eating dinner when "Miss Darnley flopped right down on the floor as though all her bones had gone soft, and we couldn't get anything out of her." The maid confirmed this.

There was a half-eaten dinner on the table, and both man and servant declared Hortense had been in the best of spirits. There had been no quarrel. Reluctantly, the "friend" had admitted that the seizure had occurred three hours before, and that they had tried to "bring her about" themselves, calling upon him only when the alternating expressions which I have referred to in the case of Peters began to appear.

As the seizure progressed, the maid had become hysterical with fright and fled. The man was of tougher timber and had remained until the end. He had been much shaken, as had Dr. Y—, by the after-death phenomena. Upon the physician declaring that the case was one for the coroner, he had lost his reticence, volunteering his name as James Martin, and expressing himself as eager for a complete autopsy. He was quite frank as to his reasons. The Darnley woman had been his mistress, and he "had enough trouble w i t h o u t her death pinned to him." Dr. Y— had gathered that he was an underworld character of some sort, and known to the police.

At any rate, there had been a thorough autopsy. No trace of disease or poison had been found. Beyond a slight valvular trouble of the heart, Hortense Darnley had been perfectly healthy. The verdict had been death by heart disease; but Dr. Y— was perfectly convinced the heart had nothing to do with it.

It was, of course, quite obvious that Hortense Darnley had died from the same cause or agency as had all the others. But to me the outstanding fact was that her apartment had been within a stone's throw of the address Ricori had given me as that of Peters! Further-

more, Martin was of the same world, if Dr. Y—'s impressions were correct. Here was conceivably a link between two of the cases—missing in the others. I determined to call in Ricori and lay all the cards before him, enlist his aid if possible.

MY INVESTIGATION had consumed two weeks. During that time I had become well acquainted with Ricori. For one thing, he interested me immensely as a product of present-day conditions; for another, I liked him despite his reputation. He was remarkably well read, of a high grade of totally unmoral intelligence, subtle and superstitious—in olden times he would probably have been a captain of condettieri, his wits and sword for hire.

I wondered about his antecedents. He had paid me several visits since the death of Peters, and quite plainly liked me. On these visits he was guarded by the tight-lipped man who had watched by the hospital window. This man's name, I learned, was McCann. He was Ricori's most trusted bodyguard, apparently wholly devoted to his white-haired chief. He was an interesting character, too, and quite approved of me. He was a drawling Southerner who had been, as he put it, "a cow-nurse down Arizona way, and got too popular on the Border."

"I'm for you, doc," he told me. "You're sure good for the boss. Sort of take his mind off business. An' when I come here I can keep my hands outa my pockets. Any time anybody's cuttin' in on your cattle, let me know. I'll ask the boss for a day off."

Then he remarked casually that he "could ring a quarter with six holes at a hundred foot range."

I did not know whether this was meant humorously or seriously. At any

"Standin' on the bench is a guy in his soup-and-nuts, yellin', 'Help, murder, take it away!' and beatin' about with his cane"

rate, Ricori never went anywhere without him, and it showed me how much he had thought of Peters that he had left McCann to guard him.

I told Braile what I was going to do, got in touch with Ricori and asked him to take dinner with Braile and me that night at my house. At seven he arrived, telling his chauffeur to return at ten. We sat at a table, with McCann, as usual, on watch in my hall, thrilling, I knew, my two night nurses—I have a small private hospital adjunct—by playing the part of gunman as conceived by the motion pictures.

Dinner over, I dismissed the butler and came to the point. I told Ricori of my questionnaires, remarking that by it I had unearthed seven cases similar to that of Peters.

"You can dismiss from your mind any idea that Peters' death was due to his connection with you, Ricori," I said. "With one possible exception, none of the seven persons involved belong to what you have called your world. If that one exception does touch your sphere of activity, it does not alter the absolute certainty that you are not involved in any way. Did you know, or ever hear of, a woman named Hortense Darnley?"

He shook his head.

"She lived," I said, "practically opposite the address you gave me for Peters."

"But Peters did not live at that address." He smiled, half apologetically. "You see, I did not know you then as well as now."

That, I admit, set me back somewhat.

"Well," I went on, "do you know a man named Martin?"

"Yes," he said, "I do. In fact I know several Martins. Can you describe the one you mean—or do you know his first name?"

"William," I replied.

Again he shook his head, frowning darkly.

"McCann may know," he said at last. "Will you call him, Dr. Lowell?"

I SUMMONED the butler, and sent for McCann.

"McCann," asked Ricori, "do you know a woman called Hortense Darnley?"

"Sure," answered McCann. "A blond doll—she's 'Butch' Martin's gal. He took her from the Vanities."

"Did Peters know her?" I asked.

"Yeah," said McCann, "sure he did. She knew Mollie—you know, boss—Peters' kid sister. Mollie quit the Follies about three years ago and he met Horty at Mollie's. Horty an' him were both daffy over Mollie's kid. He told me so. But Tom was never gay with her, if that's what you mean."

I looked sharply at Ricori, remembering distinctly that he had told me Peters had no living relatives. He did not seem in the least disconcerted.

"Where's Martin now, McCann?"

"Up in Canada, the last I heard of him," answered McCann. "Want me to find out?"

"I'll let you know later," said Ricori, and McCann went back to the hall.

"Is Martin one of your friends or foes?" I asked.

"Neither," he answered.

I sat silent for a few moments, revolving McCann's surprising information in my mind. The connection that I had vaguely looked for in my assumed proximity of Peters' and the woman's dwelling places had been shattered by his betrayal of Ricori's duplicity. But he had put in its place a stronger link. Hortense Darnley had died October 12—Peters on November 10. When had Peters last seen the woman? If the mysterious malady was caused by some unknown organism, no one, of course, could tell what its period of incubation might be. Had Peters been infected by her?

"Ricori," I said, "twice tonight I have learned that you misled me as to Peters. I'm going to forget it, because I don't believe you'll do it again. And I'm going to trust you, even to the extent of breaking professional confidence. Read these letters."

I passed him the answers to my questionnaire. He went over them in silence. When he had finished I recounted all that Dr. Y— had told me of the Darnley case. I told him in detail of the autopsies, including the tiny globes of radiance in the blood of Peters.

At that his face grew white; he crossed himself.

"*La strega!*" he muttered. "The Witch! The Witch-fire!"

"Nonsense, man!" I said. "Forget your superstitions! I want help."

"You are scientifically ignorant! There are some things, Dr. Lowell—" he began, hotly, then controlled himself.

"What is it you want me to do?"

"First," I said, "let's go over these eight cases, analyze them. Braile, have you come to any conclusions?"

"Yes," Braile answered. "I think the whole eight were murdered!"

CHAPTER III

NURSE WALTERS

THAT Braile had voiced the thought lurking behind my own mind—and without a shred of evidence, so far as I could see, to support it—irritated me.

"You're a better man than I am, Sherlock Holmes," I said sarcastically. He flushed, but repeated stubbornly:

"They were murdered."

"*La strega!*" whispered Ricori. I glared at him.

"Quit beating around the bush, Braile. What's your evidence?"

"You were away from Peters almost two hours. I was with him practically from start to finish. As I studied him, I had the feeling that the whole trouble was in the mind—that it was not his body, his nerves, his brain, that refused to function, but his will. Not quite that, either. Put it that his will had ceased to care about the functions of the body—and was centered upon killing it!"

"What you're outlining now is not murder but suicide. Well, it has been done. I've watched a few die because they had lost the will to live—"

"I don't mean that," he interrupted. "That's passive. This is active—"

"Good Lord, Braile!" I was honestly shocked. "Don't tell me you're suggesting the whole eight passed out of the picture by willing themselves out of it—and one of them only an eleven-year-old child!"

"I didn't say that," he replied. "What I felt was that it was not primarily Peters' own will doing it, but another's will which had gripped his, had wound itself around, threaded itself through his will. Another's will which he could not or did not want to resist—at least toward the end."

"*La maledetta strega!*" muttered Ricori again.

I curbed my irritation and sat considering; after all, I had a wholesome respect for Braile. He was too good a man, too sound, for one to ride roughshod over any theory he might voice.

"Have you any idea as to how these murders, if murders they are, were carried out?" I asked, politely.

"Not the slightest," said Braile.

"Let's consider the murder theory. Ricori, you have had more experience in this line than we, so listen carefully and forget your witch," I said, brutally enough. "There are three essential factors to any murder—method, opportunity, motive. Take them in order. First—the method.

"There are three ways a person can be killed by poison or by infection—through the nose, and this includes by gases—through the mouth, and through the skin. There are two or three other avenues. Hamlet's father, for example, was poisoned, we read, through the ear, although I've always had my doubts about that.

"I think, pursuing the hypothesis of murder, we can bar out all approaches except mouth, nose, skin—and, by the last, entrance to the blood can be accomplished by absorption as well as by penetration. Was there any evidence

whatever—on the skin, in the membranes of the respiratory channels, in the throat, in the other viscera, stomach, blood, nerves, brain—of anything of the sort?"

"You know there wasn't," he answered.

"Quite so. Then except for the problematical lighted corpuscle, there is absolutely no evidence of method. Therefore we have absolutely nothing in essential number one upon which to base a theory of murder. Let's take number two—opportunity.

"We have a tarnished lady, a racketeer, a respectable spinster, a bricklayer, an eleven-year-old school-girl, a banker, an acrobat and a trapeze performer. There, I submit, is about as incongruous a congregation as is possible. So far as we can tell, none of them except conceivably the circus men—and Peters and the Darnley woman—had anything in common.

"How could anyone who had opportunity to come in close enough contact to Peters the racketeer to kill him have equal opportunity to come in similar close contact with Ruth Bailey, the Social Register maiden-lady? How could one who found a way to make contact with banker Marshall come equally close to acrobat Standish? And so on—you perceive the difficulty? To administer whatever it was that caused the deaths—if they were murder—would be no casual matter. It implies a certain degree of intimacy. You agree?"

"Partly," he conceded.

"Had they all lived in the same neighborhood, we might assume that they might normally have come within range of the hypothetical killer. But they did not—"

"Pardon me, Dr. Lowell," Ricori interrupted, "but suppose they had some common interest which brought them within that range."

"What possible common interest could so divergent a group have had?"

"One common interest is very plainly indicated in these reports and in what McCann told us."

"What do you mean, Ricori?"

"Babies," he answered. "Or at least—children."

BRAILE nodded. "I noticed that."

"Consider the reports," Ricori went on. "Miss Bailey is described as charitable and devoted to children. Her charities, presumably, took the form of helping them. Marshall, the banker, was interested in child welfare. The bricklayer, the acrobat and the trapeze performer had children. Anita was a child. Peters and the Darnley woman were, to use McCann's expression, 'daffy' over a baby."

"But," I objected, "if they are murders, they are the work of one hand. It is beyond the range of possibility that all of the eight were interested in one baby, one child, or one group of children."

"Very true," said Braile. "But all could have been interested in one especial, peculiar thing which they believed would be of benefit to or would delight the child or children to whom each was devoted. And that peculiar article might be obtainable in only one place. If we could find that this is the fact, then certainly that place would bear investigation."

"It is," I said, "undeniably worth looking into. Yet it seems to me that the common interest idea works two ways. The homes of those who died might have had something of common interest to an individual. The murderer, for example, might be a radio adjuster. Or a plumber. Or a collector. An electrician. And so on and so on."

Braile shrugged a shoulder. Ricori did not answer; he sat deep in thought, as though he had not heard me.

"Please listen, Ricori," I said. "We've gotten this far. Method of murder—if it is murder—unknown. Opportunity for killing—find some person whose business, profession or whatnot was a matter of interest to each of the eight, and whom they visited or who visited them; said business being concerned, possibly, in some way with babies or older children.

Now for motive. Revenge, gain, love, hate, jealousy, self-protection? None of these seems to fit, for again we come to that barrier of dissimilar stations in life."

"How about the satisfaction of an appetite for death—wouldn't you call that a motive?" asked Braile, oddly.

Ricori half rose from his chair, stared at him with a curious intentness, then sank back. I noticed he was now all alert.

"I was about to discuss the possibility of a homicidal maniac," I said, somewhat testily.

"That's not exactly what I mean. You remember Longfellow's lines:

> 'I shot an arrow into the air,
> It fell to earth I know not where.'

"I've never acquiesced in the idea that was an inspired bit of verse meaning the sending of an argosy to some unknown port and getting it back with a surprise cargo of ivory and peacocks, apes and precious jewels. There are some people who can't stand at a window high above a busy street, or on top of a skyscraper without wanting to throw something down.

"They get a thrill in wondering who or what will be hit. The thrill is in the safety of the thrower as well as in the uncertainty. And also the feeling of power.

"It's just a bit like being God and loosing the pestilence upon the just and the unjust alike. Longfellow must have been one of those people. In his heart, he wanted to shoot a real arrow and then mull over in his imagination whether it had dropped in somebody's eye, hit a heart, or just missed someone and skewered a stray dog. Carry this on a little further.

"Give one of these people power and opportunity to loose death at random, death whose cause he is sure cannot be detected. He sits in his obscurity, in safety, a god of death. With no special malice against anyone, perhaps—impersonal, just shooting his arrows in the air, like Longfellow's archer, for the fun of it."

"And you wouldn't call such a person a homicidal maniac?" I asked, dryly.

HE SHOOK his head. "Not necessarily. Merely free of inhibitions against killing. He might have no consciousness of evil whatever. Everybody comes into this world under sentence of death—time and method of execution unknown. Well, this killer might consider himself as natural as death itself. No one who believes that things on earth are run by an all-wise, all-powerful God thinks of Him as a homicidal maniac. Yet he looses war, pestilences, misery, disease, floods, earthquakes—on believers and unbelievers alike. If you believe things are in the hands of what is vaguely termed Fate—would you call Fate a homicidal maniac?"

"Your hypothetical archer," I said, "looses a singularly unpleasant arrow.

Also the discussion is growing far too metaphysical for a simple scientist like me. Ricori, I can't lay this matter before the police. They would listen politely and laugh heartily after I had gone. If I told all that is in my mind to the medical authorities, they would deplore the decadence of a hitherto honored intellect. And I would rather not call in any private detective agency to pursue inquiries."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"You have unusual resources," I answered. "I want you to sift every movement of Peters and Hortense Darnley for the last two months. I want you to do all that is possible in the same way with all the others—"

I hesitated.

"I want you to find that one place to which, because of their love for children, each of these unfortunates were drawn. For though my reason tells me you and Braile have not the slightest real evidence upon which to base your suspicions, I grudgingly admit that I have a feeling you may be right."

"You progress, Dr. Lowell," Ricori laughed. "I predict that it will not be long before you will as grudgingly admit the possibility of my witch."

"I am sufficiently abased," I replied, "by my present credulity not to deny even that."

Ricori laughed again, and busied himself copying the essential information from the reports. Ten o'clock struck. McCann came up to say that the car was waiting and we accompanied Ricori to the door. The gunman had stepped out and was on the steps when a thought came to me.

"Where do you begin, Ricori?"

"With Peters' sister. I go there now."

"Does she know Peters is dead?"

"No," he answered, reluctantly. "She thinks him away. He is often away for long, and for reasons which she understands he is not able to communicate with her directly. At such times I keep her informed. And the reason is because she dearly loved him and would be in such sorrow."

"Does she know the Darnley woman is dead, I wonder?"

"I do not know. Probably. Although McCann evidently does not."

"Well," I said, "I don't see how you're going to keep Peters' death from her now. But that's your business."

"Exactly," he answered, and followed McCann to the car.

BRAILE and I had hardly gotten back to my library when the telephone rang. Braile answered it. I heard him curse, and saw that the hand that held the transmitter was shaking. He said: "We will come at once."

He set the transmitter down slowly; then turned to me with twitching face.

"Nurse Walters has it!"

I felt a distinct shock. As I have said, Walters was a perfect nurse, and besides that a thoroughly good and attractive young woman. A pure Gaelic type—blue-black hair, blue eyes with astonishingly long lashes, milk-white skin—yes, singularly attractive. After a moment or two of silence I said:

"Well, Braile, there goes all our fine-spun reasoning. Also your murder theory. From the Darnley woman to Peters to Walters. No doubt now that it's some infectious disease."

"Isn't there?" he asked grimly. "I'm not prepared to admit it. I happen to know Walters spends most of her money on a little invalid niece who lives with her—a child of five. Ricori's thread of common interest moves into her case."

"Nevertheless," I said as grimly, "I intend to see that every precaution is taken against a dangerously infectious malady."

By the time we had put on our hats and coats my car was waiting. The hospital was only two blocks away, but I did not wish to waste a moment. I ordered Nurse Walters removed to an isolated ward used for observation of suspicious diseases. Examining her, I found the same flaccidity as I had noted in the case of

Peters. But I observed that, unlike him, her eyes and face were devoid of terror. Horror there was, and a great loathing. Nothing of panic. She gave me the same impression of seeing both within and without. As I studied her, I distinctly saw a flash of recognition come into her eyes, and with it appeal. I looked at Braile—he nodded, he, too, had seen it.

I went over her body inch by inch. It was unmarked except for a pinkish patch upon her right instep Closer examination made me think this had been some superficial injury such as a chafing, or a light burn or scald. If so, it had completely healed, the new skin healthy.

In all other ways her case paralleled that of Peters—and the others. She had collapsed, the nurse told me, without warning while getting dressed to go home. My inquiry was interrupted by an exclamation from Braile. I turned to the bed and saw that Walters' hand was slowly lifting, trembling as though its raising was by some terrific strain of will. The index finger was half pointing. I followed its direction to the discolored patch upon the foot. And then I saw her eyes, by that same tremendous effort, focus there.

The strain was too great; the hand dropped, the eyes again were pools of horror. Yet clearly she had tried to convey to me some message, something that had to do with that healed wound.

CHAPTER IV

RICORI IS STRICKEN

I QUESTIONED the nurse as to whether Walters had said anything to anyone about any injury to her foot. She replied that she had not to her, nor had any of the other nurses spoken of it. Nurse Robbins, however, shared the apartment with Harriet and Diana. I asked who Diana was, and she told me that was the name of the little niece. This was Robbins' night off, I found, and gave instructions to have her get in touch with me the moment she returned to the apartment.

By now Hoskins was taking his samples for the blood tests. I asked him to concentrate upon the microscopic smears and to notify me immediately if he discovered one of the luminous corpuscles. Bartano, an outstanding expert upon tropical diseases, happened to be in the hospital, as well as Somers, a brain specialist in whom I had strong confidence. I called them in for observation, saying nothing of the previous cases.

While they were examining Walters, Hoskins called up to say he had isolated one of the corpuscles. I asked the pair to go to Hoskins and give me their opinion upon what he had to show them. In a little while they returned, somewhat annoyed and mystified. Hoskins, they said, had spoken of a "leucocyte containing a phosphorescent Nucleolus." They had looked at the slide but had been unable to see any such thing. Hoskins, taking their place at the microscope, had been unable to find it again.

Somers very seriously advised me to insist upon Hoskins having his eyes examined. Bartano said caustically that he would have been quite as surprised to have seen such a thing as he would have been to have seen a miniature mermaid swimming around in an artery. By these remarks, I realized afresh the wisdom in my silence.

Nor did the expected changes in expression occur. The horror and intense loathing persisted, and were commented upon by both Bartano and Somers as "unusual." They thought that the condition was caused by a brain lesion of some kind. They did not think there was any evidence either of microbic infection or of drugs or poison. Agreeing that it was a most interesting case, and asking me to let them know its progress and outcome, they departed.

At the beginning of the fourth hour there was a change of expression, but not what I had been expecting. All terror vanished, leaving only the intense loath-

ing. Once I had thought I had seen a flicker of the devilish anticipation flash over the face. If so, it was quickly mastered. About the middle of the fourth hour we saw recognition again return to her eyes. Also there was a perceptible rally of the slowing heart, and I seemed to sense an intense gathering of nervous force.

And then her eyelids began to rise and fall, slowly, as though by tremendous effort, in measured time and—purposefully. Four times they raised and lowered; there was a pause; then nine times they lifted and fell; again the pause, then they closed and opened once. Twice she did this—

"She's trying to signal," whispered Braile. "But what?"

Again the long-lashed lids dropped and rose—four times . . . pause . . . nine times . . . pause . . . once. . . .

"She's going," whispered Braile.

I knelt, stethoscope at ears . . . slower, slower, beat the heart . . . and slower . . . and stopped.

"She's gone," I said, and arose. We bent over her, waiting for that last hideous spasm, convulsion—whatever it might be.

It did not come. Stamped upon the dead face was the loathing, and that only. Nothing of the devilish glee. Nor was there sound from the dead lips. Beneath my hand I felt the flesh of the white arm begin to stiffen.

The unknown death had destroyed Nurse Walters—there was no doubt of that. Yet in some obscure, vague way I felt that it had not conquered her. Her body, yes. But not her will!

I RETURNED home with Braile, profoundly depressed. It is difficult to describe the effect the sequence of events I am relating had upon my mind from beginning to end—and beyond the end. It was as though I walked almost constantly under the shadow of an alien world; nerves prickling as if under surveillance of invisible things not of our life . . . the subconsciousness forcing itself to the threshold of the conscious, battering at the door between and calling out to be on guard . . . every moment to be on guard. Strange phrases for an orthodox man of medicine? Let them stand.

Braile was pitiably shaken. So much so that I wondered whether there had been more than professional interest between him and the dead girl. If there had been, he did not confide in me.

It was close to four o'clock when we reached my house. I insisted that he remain with me. I called the hospital before retiring, but they had heard nothing of Nurse Robbins. I slept a few hours, very badly.

Shortly after nine Robbins called me on the telephone. She was half hysterical with grief. I bade her come to my office, and when she had done so Braile and I questioned her.

"About three weeks ago," she said. "Harriet brought home to Diana a very pretty doll. The child was enraptured. I asked Harriet where she had gotten it, and she said in a queer little store 'way down town.

" 'Job, she said—my name is Jobina—there's the queerest woman down there. I'm sort of afraid of her, Job.

"I didn't pay much attention. Besides, Harriet wasn't ever very communicative. I had the idea she was a bit sorry she had said what she had.

"Now I think of it, though, Harriet acted rather funny after that. She'd be gay and then she'd be—well, sort of thoughtful. About ten days ago she came home with a bandage around her foot. The right foot? Yes. She said she'd been having tea with the woman she'd gotten Diana's doll from. The teapot upset and the hot tea had poured down on her foot. The woman had put some salve on it right away, and now it didn't hurt.

" 'But I think I'll put something on that I know something about,' she told me. Then she slipped off her stocking and began to strip the bandage. I'd gone into the kitchen and she called me to come and look at her foot.

"'It's queer,' she said. 'That was a bad scald, Job. Yet it's practically healed. And that salve hasn't been on more than an hour.'

"I looked at her foot. There was a big red patch on the instep. But it wasn't sore, and I told her the tea couldn't have been very hot.

"'But it was really scalded, Job,' she said. 'I mean it was blistered.'

"She sat looking at the bandage and at her foot for quite a while. The salve was bluish and had a queer shine to it. I never saw anything like it before. No, I couldn't detect any odor to it. Harriet reached down and took the bandage and said:

"'Job, throw it in the fire.'

"I threw the bandage in the fire. I remembered that it gave a queer sort of flicker. It didn't seem to burn. It just flickered and then it wasn't there. Harriet watched it, and turned pale. Then she looked at her foot again.

"'Job,' she said, 'I never saw anything heal as quick as that. She *must* be a witch.'

"'What on earth are you talking about, Harriet?' I asked her.

"'Oh, nothing,' she said. 'Only I wish I had the courage to rip that place on my foot wide open—and rub in an antidote for snake bite.

"Then she laughed, and I thought she was fooling. But she painted it with iodine and bandaged it with an antiseptic. The next morning she woke me up and said:

"'Look at that foot now. Yesterday a whole pot of scalding tea poured over it. And now it isn't even tender. And the skin ought to be just smeared off. Job, I wish to the Lord it was!'

"That's all, Dr. Lowell. She didn't say any more about it and neither did I. She just seemed to forget all about it. Yes, I did ask her where the shop was and who the woman was, but she wouldn't tell me. I don't know why.

"And after that I never knew her so gay and carefree. Happy, careless. . . . Oh, I don't know why she should have died. . . . I don't . . . I don't!"

BRAILE asked: "Do the numbers 491 mean anything to you, Robbins? Do you associate them with any address Harriet knew?"

She thought, then shook her head. I told her of the measured closing and opening of Walters' eyes.

"She was clearly attempting to convey some message in which those numbers figured. Think again."

Suddenly she straightened, and began counting upon her fingers. She nodded.

"Could she have been trying to spell out something? If it was letters they would read d, i and a. They're the first three letters of Diana's name."

Well, of course that seemed the simple explanation. She might have been trying to ask us to take care of the child. I suggested this to Braile. He shook his head. "She knew I'd do that," he said. "No, it was something else."

A little after Robbins had gone, Ricori called up. I told him of Walters' death. He was greatly moved. And after that came the melancholy business of the autopsy. The results were precisely the same as is in the death of Peters. There was nothing whatever to show why she had died.

At about four o'clock the next day Ricori again called me on the telephone.

"Will you be at home between six and nine, Dr. Lowell?" There was suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"Certainly, if it is important," I answered after consulting my appointment book. "Have you found out anything, Ricori?"

He hesitated.

"I do not know. I think perhaps—yes."

"You mean," I did not even try to hide my own eagerness, "you mean—the hypothetical place we discussed?"

'Perhaps. I will know later. I go now to where it may be."

"Tell me this, Ricori—what do you expect to find?"

"Dolls!" he answered. And as though to avoid further questions he hung up before I could speak.

Dolls! I sat thinking. Walters had bought a doll. And in that same unknown place where she had bought it, she had sustained the injury which had so worried her—or rather, whose unorthodox behavior had so worried her. Nor was there doubt in my mind, after hearing Robbins' story, that it was to that injury she attributed her seizure, and she tried to tell us so. We had not been mistaken in our interpretation of that first desperate effort of will I have described.

She might, of course, have been in error. The scald, or rather the salve, may have had nothing whatever to do with her condition. Yet Walters had been strongly interested in a child. Children were the common interest of all who had died as she had. And certainly the one great common interest of children is dolls. What was it that Ricori had discovered?

I called Braile, but could not get him. I called up Robbins and told her to bring the doll to me immediately; which she did.

The doll was a peculiarly beautiful thing. It had been cut from wood, then covered with gesso. It was curiously lifelike. A baby doll, with an elfin little face. Its dress was exquisitely embroidered, a folk-dress of some country I could not place. It was, I thought, almost a museum piece, and one whose price Nurse Walters could hardly have afforded. It bore no mark by which either maker or seller could be identified. After I had examined it minutely I laid it away in a drawer. I waited impatiently to hear from Ricori.

AT SEVEN o'clock there was a sustained peremptory ringing of the door bell. Opening my study door, I heard the voice of McCann, Ricori's bodyguard, in the hall, and called to him to come up. At first glance I knew something was wrong. His tight-mouthed, tanned face was a sallow yellow, his eyes held a dazed look. He spoke from stiff lips:

"Come down to the car. I think the boss is dead."

"Dead!" I exclaimed, and was down the stairs and out beside the car in a breath. The chauffeur was standing beside the door. He opened it, and I saw Ricori huddled in a corner of the rear seat. I could feel no pulse, and when I raised the lids of his eyes they stared at me sightlessly. Yet he was not cold.

"Bring him in," I ordered. McCann and the chauffeur carried him into the house and placed him on the examination table in my office. I bared Ricori's breast and applied the stethoscope. I could detect no signs of the heart functioning. Nor was there, apparently, any respiration. I made a few other rapid tests. To all appearances, Ricori was quite dead. And yet—I was not satisfied. I did the things customary in doubtful cases, but without result.

McCann and the chauffeur had been standing close beside me. They read my verdict in my face. I saw a strange glance pass between them, and obviously each of them had a touch of panic, the chauffeur more markedly than McCann. The latter asked in a level, monotonous voice:

"Could it have been poison?"

"Yes, it could—" I stopped.

Poison! And that mysterious errand about which he had telephoned me! And the possibility of poison in the other cases! But this death—and again I felt the doubt—had not been like those others.

"McCann," I said, "when and where did you first notice anything wrong?"

He answered, still in that monotonous voice:

"About six blocks down the street. The boss was sitting close to me. All at once he says, 'Jesu!' Like he's scared. He shoves his hands up to his chest. He gives a kind of groan an' stiffens out: I says to him, 'What's the matter, boss,

you got a pain?' He don't answer me, an then he sort of falls against me an' I see his eyes is wide open. He looks dead to me. So I yelps to Paul to stop the car and we both look him over. Then we beat it here."

I went to a cabinet and poured them stiff drinks of brandy. They needed it. I threw a sheet over Ricori.

"Sit down," I said, "and you, McCann, tell me exactly what occurred from the time you started out with Mr. Ricori to wherever it was he went. Don't skip a single detail."

He said:

"About two o'clock the boss goes to Mollie's—that's Peters' sister—stays an hour, comes out, goes home and tells Paul to be back at four-thirty. But he's doing a lot of phoning so we don't start till five. He tells Paul where he wants to go, a place over in a little street down off Battery Park. He says to Paul not to go through the street, just park the car over by the Battery. And he says to me, 'McCann, I'm going in this place myself. I don't want 'em to know I ain't by myself,' he says. 'I got reasons. You hang around an' look in now an' then, but don't come in unless I call you.' I says, 'Boss, do you think it's wise?' An' he says, 'I know what I'm doing an' you do what I tell you, see?' So there ain't any argument to that.

"We got down to this place an' Paul does like he's told, an' the boss walks up the street an' he stops at a little joint that's got a lot of dolls in the window. I looks in the place as I go past. There ain't much light, but I see a lot of other dolls inside an' a thin gal at a counter. She looks white as a fish's belly to me, an' after the boss has stood at the window a minute or two he goes in, an' I go by slow to look at the gal again because she sure looks whiter than I ever saw a gal look who's on her two feet.

"I watched the wax taking shape under those white fingers until it had become a small and almost perfect copy of me"

'The boss is talkin' to the gal who's showing him some dolls. The next time I go by there's a woman in the place. She's so big, I stand at the window a minute to look at her because I never seen anybody that looks like her. She's got a brown face an' it looks sort of like a horse, an' a little mustache an' moles, an' she's as funny a looking brand as the fish-white gal. Big an' fat.

"But I get a peep at her eyes—boy, what eyes! Big an' black an' bright, an' somehow I don't like them any more than the rest of her. The next time I go by, the boss is over in a corner with the big dame He's got a wad of bills in his hand and I see the gal watchin' sort of frightened like. The next time I do my beat, I don't see either the boss or the woman.

"So I stand lookin' through the window because I don't like the boss out of my sight in this joint. An' the next thing I see is the boss coming out of a door at the back of the shop. He's madder'n heck an' carrying something an' the woman is behind him an' her eyes are spitting fire. The boss is jabbering, but I can't hear what he's saying, an' the dame is jabbering, too, an' making funny passes at him. Funny passes? Why, funny motions with her hands. But the boss heads for the door an' when he gets to it I see him stick what he's carrying inside his overcoat an' button it up around it.

"It's a doll; I see its legs dangling down before he gets it under his coat A big one, too, for it makes quite a bulge—"

HE PAUSED; began mechanically to roll a cigarette; then glanced at the covered body and threw the cigarette away. He went on:

"I never see the boss so mad before. He's muttering to himself in Italian an saying something over an' over that sounds like '*strayga*.' I see it ain't no time to talk so I just walk along with him. Once he says to me, more as if he's talking to himself than me if you get what I mean—he says, 'The Bible says you shall not suffer a witch to live.' Then he goes on muttering an' holding one arm fast over this doll inside his coat.

"We get to the car an' he tells Paul to beat it straight to you an' the devil take the traffic—that's right, ain't it, Paul? Yes. When we get in the car he stops muttering an' just sits there quiet, not saying anything to me until I hear him say, '*Jesu*' like I told you. And that's all, ain't it, Paul?"

The chauffeur did not answer. He sat staring at McCann with something of entreaty in his gaze. I distinctly saw McCann shake his head. The chauffeur said, in a strongly marked Italian accent, hesitatingly:

"I do not see the shop, but everything else McCann say is truth."

I got up and walked over to Ricori's body I was about to lift the sheet when something caught my eye. A red spot about as big as a dime—a blood stain Holding it in place with one finger, I carefully lifted the edge of the sheet The blood spot was directly over Ricori's heart

I took one of my strongest glasses and one of my finest probes Under the glass I could see on Ricori's breast a minute puncture, no larger than that made by a hypodermic needle. Carefully I inserted the probe. It slipped easily in and in until it touched the wall of the heart I went no further

Some needle-pointed, exceedingly fine instrument had been thrust through Ricori's breast straight into his heart

I looked at him, doubtfully; there was no reason why such a minute puncture in this region of the heart should cause death. Unless, of course, it had been poisoned; or if there had been some other violent shock which had contributed to that of the wound itself. But such shock or shocks might very well bring about in a person of Ricori's temperament some curious mental condition, producing an almost perfect coun

terfeit of death. I had heard of such case.

No, despite my tests, I was not sure Ricori was dead. But I did not tell McCann that. Alive or dead, there was one sinister fact that McCann must explain. I turned to the pair, who had been watching me closely.

"You say there were only the three of you in the car?"

Again I saw the strange glance pass between them.

"There was the doll," McCann answered, half defiantly. I brushed the answer aside, impatiently.

"I repeat: there were only the three of you in the car?"

"Three—men, yes."

"Then," I said grimly, "you two have a lot to explain. Ricori was stabbed. I'll have to call the police."

McCann arose and walked over to the body. He picked up the glass and peered through it at the tiny puncture. He looked at the chauffeur. He said:

"I told you the doll done it, Paul!"

CHAPTER V

MC CANN EXPLAINS

I SAID, incredulously, "McCann, you surely don't expect *me* to believe that."

He did not answer, rolling another cigarette which this time he did not throw away. The chauffeur staggered over to Ricori's body; he threw himself down on his knees and began what I gathered to be mingled prayers and implorations. McCann, curiously enough, was now completely himself. It was as though the removal of uncertainty as to the cause of Ricori's death had restored all his old cold confidence. He lighted the cigarette; he said, almost cheerfully:

"I'm aiming to make you believe."

I walked over to the telephone. McCann jumped in front of me and stood with his back against the instrument.

"Wait a minute, doc. If I'm the kind of rat that'll stick a knife in the heart of the man who hired me to protect him—ain't it occurred to you the spot you're on ain't so healthy? What's to keep me an' Paul from giving you the works an' making our getaway?"

Frankly, that had not occurred to me. Now I realized in what a truly dangerous position I was placed. I looked at the chauffeur. He had arisen from his knees and was standing, regarding McCann intently.

"I see you get it," McCann smiled, mirthlessly. He walked to the Italian. "Pass your rods, Paul."

Without a word the chauffeur dipped into his pockets and handed him a pair of automatics. McCann laid them on my table. He reached under his left arm and placed another pistol beside them; reached into his pocket and added a fourth.

"Sit there, doc," he said, and indicated my chair at the table. "That's all our artillery. Keep the guns right under your hands. If we make any breaks, shoot. All I ask is you don't do any calling up till you've listened."

I sat down, drawing the automatics to me, examining them to see that they were loaded. They were.

"Doc," McCann said, "there's three things I want you to consider. First, if I'd had anything to do with smearing the boss, would I be giving you a break like this? Second, I was sitting at his right side. He had on a thick overcoat. How could I reach over an' run anything as thin as whatever killed him must have been through his coat, an' through the doll, an' through his clothes, an' through him without putting up some kind of a fight? Why, Ricori was a strong man. Paul would have seen us—"

"What difference would that have made," I interrupted, "if Paul was an accomplice?"

"Right," he acquiesced, "that's so. Paul's as deep in the mud as I am. Ain't that so, Paul?" He looked sharply at the

chauffeur, who nodded. "All right, we'll leave that with a question mark behind it. Take the third point—if I'd killed the boss that way, an' Paul was in it with me, would we have took him to the one man who'd be expected to know how he was killed? An' then when you'd found out as expected, hand you an alibi like this? Doc, I ain't loco enough for that!"

His face twitched.

"Why would I want to kill him? I'd 'a' gone through hell an' back for him, an' he knew it. So would Paul."

I felt the force of all this. Deep within me I was conscious of a stubborn conviction that McCann was telling the truth—or at least the truth as he saw it. He had not stabbed Ricori. Yet to attribute the act to a doll was too fantastic. And there had been only the three men in the car. McCann had been reading my thoughts uncannily.

"It might've been one of them mechanical dolls," he said. "Geared up to stick."

"McCann, go down and bring it up to me," I said sharply.

"It ain't there," he said, and grinned at me mirthlessly. "It jumped out!"

"Preposterous—" I began.

The chauffeur broke in: "It's true. Something jump out. When I ope' the door. I think it cat, dog, maybe. I say, 'What the heck—' Then I see it. It run like everything. It stoop. It duck in shadow. I see it just as flash an' then no more. I say to McCann, 'What the devil!' McCann, he's feeling around the bottom of car. He say, 'It's the doll. It done for the boss!' I say, 'Doll? What you mean, doll?' He tell me. I know nothing of any doll before. I see the boss carry something in his coat, *sí!*"

I said ironically, "Is it your idea, McCann, that this mechanical doll was geared to run away as well as stab?"

HE FLUSHED, but answered quietly, "I ain't sayin' it *was* a mechanical doll. But anything else would be—well, pretty crazy, wouldn't it?"

"McCann," I asked abruptly, "what do you want me to do?"

"Doc, when I was down Arizona way, there was a *ranchero* died. Died sudden. There was a feller looked as if he had a lot to do with it. The marshal said, '*Hombre*, I don't think you done it—but I'm the lone one on the jury. What say?' The *hombre* says, Marshal, give me two weeks, an' if I don't bring in the feller that done it, you hang me.' The marshal says, 'Fair enough. The temporary verdict is deceased died by shock.' It was shock all right; bullet shock. All right, before the two weeks was up, along comes this feller with the murderer hog-tied to his saddle."

"I get your point, McCann. But this isn't Arizona."

"I know it ain't. But couldn't you certify it was heart disease? Temporarily? An' give me a week? Then if I don't come through, shoot the works. I won't run away. It's this way, doc. If you tell the bulls, you might just as well pick up one of them guns an' shoot me an' Paul dead right now. If we tell the bulls about the doll, they will laugh themselves sick an' fry us at Sing Sing. If we don't we fry anyway. If by a miracle the bulls drop us—there's them in the boss's crowd that'll soon remedy that. I'm telling you, doc, you'll be killing two innocent men. An' worse, you'll never find out who did kill the boss, because they will never look any further than us. Why should they?"

A cloud of suspicion gathered around my conviction of the pair's innocence. The proposal, naive as it seemed, was subtle. If I assented, the gunman and the chauffeur would have a whole week to get away, if that was the plan. If McCann did not come back, and I told the truth of the matter, I would be an accessory after the fact—in effect, co-murderer.

If I pretended that my suspicions had only then been aroused, I stood at the best convicted of ignorance. If they were captured, and recited the agreement,

again I would be charged as an accessory. It occurred to me that McCann's surrender of the pistols was extraordinarily clever. I could not say that my assent had been constrained by threats. Also, it might have been only a cunningly conceived gesture to enlist my confidence, weaken my resistance to his appeal. How did I know that the pair did not have still other weapons, ready to use if I refused?

Striving to find a way out of the trap, I walked over to Ricori. I took the precaution of dropping the automatics into my pockets as I went. I bent over Ricori. His flesh was cold, but not with the peculiar chill of death. I examined him once more, minutely. And now I could detect the faintest of pulsation in the heart . . . a bubble began to form at the corner of his lips . . . Ricori lived!

I continued to bend over him, thinking faster than ever I had before. Ricori lived, yes. But it did not lift the peril. Rather it increased it. For if McCann had stabbed him, the pair had been in collusion, and learned that they had been unsuccessful, would they not finish what they had thought ended? With Ricori alive, Ricori able to speak and to accuse them—a death more certain than the processes of law confronted them. Death at Ricori's command at the hands of his henchmen. And in finishing Ricori they would at the same time be compelled to kill me.

Still bending, I slipped a hand into my pocket, clenched an automatic, and then whirled upon them, gun leveled.

"Hands up! Both of you," I said.

Amazement flashed over McCann's face, consternation over the chauffeur's. But their hands went up.

I said, "There's no need of that clever little agreement, McCann. Ricori is not dead. When he's able to talk he'll tell what happened to him."

I WAS not prepared for the effect of this announcement. If McCann was not sincere, he was an extraordinary actor. His lanky body stiffened. I had never seen such glad relief as that stamped upon his face. Tears rolled down his tanned cheeks. The chauffeur dropped to his knees, sobbing and praying.

My suspicions were swept away. I did not believe this could be acting. In some measure I was ashamed of myself.

"You can drop your hands, McCann," I said, and slipped the automatic back in my pocket.

He said, hoarsely, "Will he live?"

I answered, "I think he has every chance. If there's no infection, I'm sure of it."

"Thank God!" whispered McCann, and over and over, "Thank God!"

And just then Braile entered, and stood staring in amazement at us.

"Ricori has been stabbed. I'll explain the whole matter later," I told him. "Small puncture over the heart and prob-

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ably penetrating it. He's suffering mainly from shock. He's coming out of it. Get him up to the annex and take care of him until I come."

Briefly I reviewed what I had done and suggested the immediate further treatment. And when Ricori was on his way to the annex, I turned to the gunman.

'McCann," I said, "I'm not going to explain. Not now. But here are your pistols, and Paul's. I'm giving you your chance."

He took the automatics, looking at me with a curious gleam in his eyes.

"I ain't saying I wouldn't like to know what touched you off, doc," he said. "But whatever you do is all right by me—if only you can bring the boss around."

"Undoubtedly there are some who will have to be notified of his condition," I replied. "I'll leave that all to you. All I know is that he was on his way to me. He had a heart attack in the car. You brought him to me. I am now treating him—for heart attack. If he should die, McCann—well, that will be another matter."

"I'll do the notifying," he answered. "There's only a couple that you'll have to see. Then I'm going down to that doll joint an' get the truth outa that hag."

His eyes were slits, his mouth a slit, too.

"No," I said, firmly. "Not yet. Put a watch on the place. If the woman goes out, discover where she goes. Watch the girl the same way. If it appears as though either of them or both of them are moving away—running off—let them. But follow them. I don't want them molested or even alarmed until Ricori can tell what happened there."

"All right," he said, but reluctantly.

"Your doll story," I reminded him, sardonically, "would not be so convincing to the police as to my somewhat credulous mind. Take no chance of them being injected into the matter. As long as Ricori is alive, there is no need of them being so injected."

I took him aside.

"Can you trust the chauffeur to do no talking?"

"Paul's all right," he said.

"Well, for both your sakes, he would better be," I warned.

They took their departure. I went up to Ricori's room. His heart was stronger, his respiration weak but encouraging. His temperature, although still dangerously subnormal, had improved. If, as I had told McCann, there was no infection, and if there had been no poison nor drug upon the weapon with which he had been stabbed, Ricori should live.

Later that night two thoroughly polite gentlemen called upon me, heard my explanation of Ricori's condition, asked if they might see him, did see him, and departed. They assured me that "win or lose" I need have no fear about my fees, nor have any hesitancy in bringing in the most expensive consultants. In exchange, I assured them that I believed Ricori had an excellent chance to recover. They asked me to allow no one to see him except themselves, and McCann. They thought it might save me trouble to have a couple of men whom they would send to me, to sit at the door of the room—outside, of course, in the hall. I answered that I would be delighted.

In an exceedingly short time two quietly watchful men were on guard at Ricori's door, just as they had been over Peters.

In my dreams that night dolls danced around me, pursued me, threatened me. My sleep was not pleasant.

CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE EXPERIENCE

MORNING showed a marked improvement in Ricori's condition. The deep coma was unchanged, but his temperature was nearly normal; respiration and heart action quite satisfactory. Braile and I divided duties so that one of us could be constantly within call of the

nurses. The guards were relieved after breakfast by two others. One of my quiet visitors of the night before made his appearance, looked at Ricori and received with unfeigned gratification my reassuring report.

After I had gone to bed the obvious idea had occurred to me that Ricori might have made some memorandum concerning his quest; I had felt reluctance about going through his pockets, however. Now seemed to be the opportunity to ascertain whether he had or had not. I suggested to my visitor that he might wish to examine any papers Ricori had been carrying, adding that we had been interested together in a certain matter, that he had been on his way to discuss this with me when he had undergone his seizure; and that he might have carried some notes of interest to me. My visitor agreed; I sent for Ricori's overcoat and suit and we went through them. There were a few papers, but nothing relating to our investigation.

In the breast pocket of his overcoat, however, was a curious object—a piece of thin cord about eight inches long in which had been tied nine knots, spaced at irregular intervals. They were curious knots, too, not quite like any I could recollect having observed. I studied the cord with an unaccountable but distinct feeling of uneasiness. I glanced at my visitor and saw a puzzled look in his eyes. And then I remembered Ricori's superstition, and reflected that the knotted cord was probably a talisman or charm of some sort. I put it back in the pocket.

When again alone I took it out and examined it more minutely. The cord was of human hair, tightly braided—the hair a peculiarly pale ash and unquestionably a woman's. Each knot, I now saw, was tied differently. Their structure was complex. The difference between them, and their irregular spacing, gave the vague impression of forming a word or sentence. I had the same sensation of standing before a blank door which it was vitally important for me to open that I had felt while watching Peters die. Obeying some obscure impulse, I did not return the thing to the pocket but threw it into the drawer with the doll.

Shortly after three, McCann telephoned me. I was more than glad to hear from him. In the broad light of day his story of the occurrence in Ricori's car had become incredibly fantastic; all my doubts returned. I had even begun again to review my unenviable position if he disappeared. Some of this must have shown in the cordiality of my greeting, for he laughed heartily.

"Thought I'd rode off the range, did you, doc? You couldn't drive me away. Wait till you see what I got."

I awaited his arrival with impatience. When he appeared he had with him a sturdy, red-faced man who carried a large paper clothing-bag. I recognized him as a policeman I had encountered now and then on the Drive, although I had never before seen him out of uniform. I bade the two be seated, and the officer sat on the edge of a chair, holding the clothes-bag gingerly across his knees. I looked at McCann, inquiringly.

"SHEVLIN," he waved his hand at the officer, "said he knew you, doc. But I'd have brought him along anyway."

"If I didn't know Dr. Lowell, it's not me that'd be here, McCann me lad," said Shevlin glumly. "But it's brains he's got in his head, an' not a cold boiled potato like that lootenant."

"Well," said McCann maliciously, "the doc'll prescribe for you anyway, Tim."

"'Tis no prescribing I want, I tell you," Shevlin bellowed. "I seen it wit' me own eyes, I'm tellin' you. An' if Dr. Lowell tells me I was drunk or crazy I'll tell him t'hell wit' him like I told the lootenant. An' I'm tellin' you, too, McCann."

I listened to this with growing amazement.

"Now, Tim, now, Tim," soothed McCann, "I believe you. You don't know how much I want to believe you—or why, either."

He gave me a quick glance, and I gathered that whatever the reason he had brought the policeman to see me, he had not spoken to him of Ricori.

"You see, doc, when I told you about that doll getting up an' jumping out of the car you thought I was loco. All right, I says to me, maybe it didn't get far. Maybe it was one of them improved mechanical dolls, but even if it was it has to run down some time. So I goes hunting for somebody else that might have seen it. An' this morning I runs into Shevlin here. An' he tells me. Go on, Tim, give the doc what you gave me."

Shevlin blinked, shifted the bag cautiously and began. He had the dogged air of repeating a story that he had told over and over. And to unsympathetic audiences; for as he went on he would look at me defiantly, or raise his voice belligerently.

"It was one o'clock this mornin'. I am on me beat when I hear somebody yellin desperate like 'Help!' he yells. 'Murder! Take it away!' he yells. I go runnin', an' there standin' on a bench is a guy in his soup-an'-nuts an' a high-hat flying off his head, an him a-hittin' this way an' that wit' his cane, an' a-dancin' up an' down, and it's him that's doin' the yellin'.

"I reach over an' tap him on the shins wit' me night-club, an' he looks down an' then flops right in me arms. I get a whiff of his breath an' I think I see what's the matter wit' him all right. I get him on his feet, an' I says: 'Come on now, the pink'll soon run off the elephants,' I says. 'Tell me where you live an' I'll put you in a taxi, or do you want t'go to a hospital?' I says.

"He stands there a-holdin' onto me an a-shakin' an' he says: 'D'ye think I'm drunk?' An' I begins t' tell him, 'An' how —' when I looks at him, an' he *ain't* drunk. He might've *been* drunk, but he ain't drunk now. An' all t'once he flops down on the bench an' pulls up his pants an' down his socks, an' I sees blood runnin' down from a dozen little holes, an' he says, 'Maybe you'll be tellin' me it's pink elephants done that?'

"I looks at 'em an' feels em, an' it's blood all right, as if somebody's been jabbin' a hat-pin in him—"

Involuntarily I stared at McCann. He did not meet my eyes. He was imperturbably rolling a cigarette—

"An' I says: 'What in blazes done it?' An' he says—'The doll done it!' "

A little shiver ran down my back, and I looked at the gunman. This time he gave me a level, warning glance. Shevlin glared up at me.

" 'The doll done it!' he tells me," Shevlin shouted. "He tells me the doll done it."

McCANN chuckled and Shevlin turned his glare from me to him. I said hastily:

"I understand, officer. He told you it was the doll made the wounds. An astonishing assertion, certainly."

"Y'don't believe it, y'mean?" demanded Shevlin furiously

"I believe he told you that, yes," I answered "But go on."

"All right, would y'be sayin' I was drunk, too, t'believe it? Fer it's what that potato-brained lootenant did."

"No, no," I assured him hastily. Shevlin settled back, and went on:

"I asks the drunk, 'What's her name?' 'What's whose name?' says he. 'The doll's,' I says. 'I'll bet you she was a blond doll,' I says, 'an' wants her picture in the tabloids. The brunettes don't use hat-pins,' I says. 'They're all for the knife.'

" 'Officer,' he says solemn, 'it was a doll. A little man doll. An' when I say doll I mean a doll. I was walkin' along,' he says, 'gettin' the air. I won't deny I'd had some drinks,' he says, 'but nothin' I couldn't carry. I'm swishin' along wit' me cane,' he says, 'when I drops it by that bush there,' he says, pointin'. 'I reach down t' pick it up,' he says, 'an' there I see a doll. It's a big doll an' it's all huddled up crouchin', as if some-

body dropped it that way. I reaches over t' pick it up,' he says, 'an' as I touch it, the doll jumps as if I hit a spring, an' jumps right over me head,' he says. 'I'm surprised,' he says, 'an' considerably startled, an' I'm crouchin' there lookin' where the doll was when I feel a bird of a pain in the calf of me leg,' he says, 'like I been stabbed. I jump up, an' there's this doll wit' a big pin in its hand just ready t' jab me again,' he says.

"'Maybe,' says I to the drunk, 'maybe 'twas a midget you seen.' 'Midget, nothing!' says he. 'It was a doll! An' it was jabbin' me wit' a hat-pin. It was about two feet high,' he says, 'wit' blue eyes, an' it was grinnin' at me in a way that made me blood run cold,' he says. 'An while I stood there paralyzed, it jabbed me again. I jumped on the bench,' he says, 'an' it danced around, an' jumped up an' jabbed me, an' jumped down an up again an' jabbed me. I think it meant to kill me, an' I yelled like everything, says the drunk, 'An' who wouldn't?' he asks me. 'An' then you come,' he says, 'an' the doll ducked into the bushes there, an' fer the Lord's sake, officer, come wit' me till I can get a taxi an go home,' he says, 'for I make no bones tellin' you I'm scared right down to me gizzard,' says he.

"So I take the drunk by the arm, went on Shevlin, "thinkin', poor lad, what this poison booze'll make you see, but still puzzled about how he got them holes in the legs, an' we come out to the Drive. The drunk is still a-shakin' an' I'm a-waitin' to hail a taxi, when all of a sudden he lets out a squeal— 'There it goes! Look, there it goes!'

"I follow his finger, an' sure enough I sees somethin' scuttlin' over the sidewalk an' out on the Drive. The light's none too good, an' I think it's a cat or maybe a dog. Then I see there's a little coupe drawn up opposite at the curb. The cat or dog, whatever it is, seems to be makin' fer it. The drunk's still yellin' an' I'm tryin' to see what it is, when down the Drive hell-fer-leather comes a big car. It hits this thing ker-smack an' never stops. He's out of sight before I can raise me whistle. I think I see the thing wriggle an' I says, still thinkin' it's a cat or a dog, 'I'll put you out of your misery,' an' I run over to it wit' me gun. As I do the coupe that's been waitin' shoots off hell-for-leather, too. I get over to what the other car hit, an' I look at it—"

He slipped the bag off his knees, set it down beside him and untied the top.

"An' this is what it was."

Out of the bag he drew a doll, or what remained of it. One leg hung by a thread. Its clothing was torn and begrimed with the dirt of the roadway. It was a doll—but uncannily did it give the impression of a mutilated pygmy. Its neck hung limply over its breast.

McCann stepped over and lifted the doll's head—

I stared, and stared . . . with a prickling of the scalp . . . with a slowing of the heart beat. . .

For the face that looked up at me, blue eyes glaring, was the face of Peters!

And on it, like the thinnest of veils, was the shadow of that demoniac exultance I had watched spread over the face of Peters after death and still the pulse of his heart!

CHAPTER VII

THE PETERS DOLL

SHEVLIN watched me as I stared at the doll. He was satisfied by its effect upon me.

"A terrible lookin' thing, ain't it?" he asked. "The doctor sees it, McCann. I told you he had brains." He jounced the doll down upon his knee, and sat there like a red-faced ventriloquist with a peculiarly malevolent dummy—certainly it would not have surprised me to have heard the diabolic laughter issue from its faintly grinning mouth.

"Now I'll tell you, Dr. Lowell," Shevlin went on. "I stands there lookin' at

this doll, an' I picks it up. 'There's more in this than meets the eye, Tim Shevlin, I say to meself, an' I looks to see what's become of the drunk. He's standin' where I left him, an' I walk over to him an' he says: 'Was it a doll like I told you? Hah! I told you it was a doll! Hah! That's him!' he says, gettin' a peek at what I'm carryin'. So I says to him, 'Young feller me lad, there's somethin' wrong here. You're goin' to the station wit' me an' tell the lootenant what you told me an show him your legs an' all,' I says, an the drunk says, 'Fair enough, but keep that thing on the other side of me.' So we go to the station.

"The lootenant's there an' the sergeant an' a coupla flatties. I marches up an' sticks the doll on the top of the desk in front of the lootenant.

" 'What's this?' he says, grinnin'. 'Another kidnappin'?'

" 'Show him your legs,' I tells the drunk. 'Not unless they're better than the Follies,' grins this potato-brained ape. But the drunk's rolled up his pants an' down his socks an' shows 'em.

" 'What in blazes done that?' says the lootenant, standin' up an' losin' his grin.

" 'The doll,' says the drunk. The lootenant looks at him, and sits back blinkin'. An' I tell him about answerin' the drunk's yells, an' what he tells me, an what I sees. The sergeant laughs an' the flatties laugh, but the lootenant gets red in the face an' says, 'Are you tryin' to kid me, Shevlin?' An' I says, 'I'm tellin' you what he tells me an' what I seen, an' there's the doll.' An' he says, 'This brand of liquor is fierce but I never knew it was catchin'. An' he crooks his finger at me an' says, 'Come up here, I want t' smell your breath.' An' then I know it's all up, because t' tell the truth, the drunk had a flask an' I'd took one wit' him. Only one an' the only one I'd had. But there it was on me breath. An' the lootenant says, 'I thought so. Get down.'

"An' then he starts bellerin' an hollerin' at the drunk—'You wit' your soup-an'-nuts an' your silk hat, you ought to be a credit to your city an' what you think you can do, corrupt a good officer an' kid me? You done the first but you ain't doin' the second,' he yelps. 'Put him in the cooler,' he yelps, 'an' throw his doll in wit' him t' keep him company!' An' at that the drunk lets out a screech an' drops t' the floor. He's out good an' plenty. An' the lootenant says, 'The poor fool . . . he believes his own lie. Bring him around an' let him go

"An' he says t' me, 'If you weren't such a good man, Tim, I'd have you up for this. Take your degenret doll an' go home,' he says. 'I'll send a relief t' your beat. An' take t'-morrow off an' sober up,' says he. 'An' I says t' him, 'All right, but I seen what I seen. An' the plague take you all,' I says t' the flatties. An everybody's laughin' fit t' split. An' I says t' the lootenant, 'If you break me for it or not the plague take you, too, I says. But they keep on laughin' so I takes the doll an' walks out."

He paused.

"I take the doll home," he remarked. "I told it all t' Maggie, me wife. An' what does she tell me? 'T' think you've been off the hard stuff or near off so long, she says, 'wit' this talk of stabbin' dolls, an' insultin' the lootenant, an' maybe gettin' sent t' Staten Island,' she says. 'An' Jenny just gettin' into High School! Get t' bed,' she says, 'an' sleep it off, an' throw the doll in the garbage,' she says. But by now I was gettin' good an' mad, an' I do not throw it in the garbage but I take it wit' me. An' a while ago I meets McCann, an' somehow he knows somethin', an' I tells him an' he brings me here. An' just fer what I don't know."

"Do you want me to speak to the lieutenant?" I asked.

"What could you say?" he replied, reasonably enough. "If you tell him the drunk was right an' the doll stabbed him, an' that I'm right an' I did see the doll run, what'll he think? He'll think you're as crazy as I must be. An' if you explain maybe I was a little off me nut just fer the minute, it's to the hospital they'll be

sendin' me. No, doctor, I'm much obliged. All I can do is say nothin' more an' be dignified an' maybe hand out a shiner or two if they get too rough. It's grateful I am fer the kindly way you've listened. It makes me feel better."

Shevlin got to his feet, sighing heavily.

"An' what do you think? I mean about what the drunk said he seen, an' what I seen?" he asked somewhat nervously.

"I cannot speak for the inebriate," I answered cautiously. "As for yourself—well, it might be that the doll had been lying out there in the street, and that a cat or dog ran across just as the automobile went by. Dog or cat escaped, but the action directed your attention to the doll and you thought—"

He interrupted me with a wave of the hand.

"All right. All right. 'Tis enough. I'll just leave the doll wit' you to pay for the dignoses, sir."

With considerable dignity and perceptibly heightening color Shevlin stalked from the room. McCann was shaking with silent laughter. I picked up the doll and laid it on my table. I looked at the malignant little face—and I did not feel much like laughing.

FOR some obscure reason I took the child's doll out of the drawer and placed it beside the Peters doll; took out the strangely knotted cord and set it between them. McCann was standing at my side, watching. I heard him give a low whistle.

"Where did you get that, doc?" he pointed to the cord. I told him. He whistled again.

"The boss never knew he had it, that's sure," he said. "Wonder who slipped it over on him? The old hag, of course. But how?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Why, the witch's ladder," he pointed again to the cord. "That's what they call it down Mexico way. It's bad medicine. The witch slips it to you and then she has power over you. . . ." He bent over the cord. . . . "Yep, it's the witch's ladder—the nine knots an' woman's hair . . . an' in the boss's pocket!"

He stood staring at the cord. I noticed that he made no attempt to pick it up.

"Take it up and look at it closer, McCann," I said.

"Not me!" he stepped back. "I'm telling you it's bad medicine, doc."

I had been steadily growing more and more irritated against the fog of superstition gathering ever heavier around me, and now I lost my patience.

"See here, McCann," I said, hotly, "are you trying to kid me? Every time I see you I am brought face to face with some fresh outrage against credibility. First it is your doll in the car. Then Shevlin. And now your witch's ladder. What's your idea?"

He looked at me with narrowed eyes, a faint flush reddening the high cheekbones.

"The only idea I got," he drawled more slowly than usual, "is to see the boss on his feet. An' to get whoever got him. As for Shevlin—you don't think he was faking, do you?"

"I do not," I answered. "But I am reminded that you were beside Ricori in the car when he was stabbed. And I cannot help wondering how it was that you discovered Shevlin so quickly today."

"Meaning by that?" he asked.

"Meaning," I answered, "that your drunken man has disappeared. Meaning that it would be entirely possible for him to have been your confederate. Meaning that the episode which so impressed the worthy Shevlin could very well have been merely a clever bit of acting, and the doll in the street and the opportunely speeding automobile, a carefully planned maneuver to bring about the exact results it did. After all, I have only your word and the chauffeur's word that the doll was not down in the car the whole time you were here last night. Meaning that—"

I stopped, realizing that essentially, I was only venting upon him the bad temper aroused by my perplexity.

"I'll finish for you," he said. "Meaning that I'm the one behind the whole thing."

His face was white, and his muscles tense.

"It's a good thing for you that I like you, doc," he went on, levelly. "It's a better thing for you that I know you're on the level with the boss. Best of all, maybe, that you're the only one who can help him if he can be helped. That's all."

"McCann," I said. "I'm sorry, deeply sorry. Not for what I said, but for having to say it. After all, the doubt is there. And it is a reasonable doubt. You must admit that. Better to spread it before you than keep it hidden."

"What might be my motive?"

"Ricori has powerful enemies. He also has powerful friends. How convenient to his enemies if he could be wiped out without suspicion, and a physician of highest repute and unquestionable integrity be inveigled into giving the death a clean bill of health. It is because of my professional pride, not personal egotism, that I am that kind of a physician, McCann."

He nodded. His face softened and I saw the dangerous tenseness relax

"I'VE no argument, doc. Not on that or nothing else you've said. But I'm thanking you for your high opinion of my brains. It'd certainly take a pretty clever man to work all this out this-a-way. Sort of like one of them cartoons that shows seventy-five gimcracks set up to drop a brick on a man's head at exactly sixteen seconds after two in the afternoon. Yeah I must be clever."

I winced at this broad sarcasm, but did not answer. McCann took up the Peters doll and began to examine it; I went to the phone to ask Ricori's condition. I was halted by an exclamation from the gunman. He beckoned to me, and, handing me the doll, pointed to the collar of its coat. I felt about it. My fingers touched what seemed to be the round head of a large pin. I pulled out as though from a dagger sheath a slender piece of metal nine inches long. It was thinner than an average hatpin, rigid and needle-pointed.

Instantly I knew that I was looking upon the instrument that had pierced Ricori's heart!

"Another outrage!" McCann drawled. 'Maybe I put it there, doc!"

He laughed. I studied the queer blade —for blade it surely was. It appeared to be of finest steel, although I was not sure it was that metal. Its rigidity was like none I knew. The little knob at the head was half an inch in diameter and less like a pin-head than the haft of a poniard. Under the magnifying glass it showed small grooves upon it . . . as though to make secure the grip of a hand . . . a doll's hand . . . a doll's dagger! There were stains upon it.

CHAPTER VIII

BEHEADED

I SHOOK my head impatiently, and put the little dagger aside, determining to test those stains later. They were blood-stains I knew that, but I must make sure. And yet, if they were, it would not be certain proof of the incredible—that a doll's hand had used this deadly thing.

I picked up the Peters doll and began to study it carefully. I could not determine of what it was made. It was not of wood, like the other doll. More than anything else, the material resembled a fusion of rubber and wax. I knew of no such composition. I stripped it of the clothing. The undamaged part of the doll was anatomically perfect. The hair was human hair, carefully planted in the scalp. The eyes were blue crystals of some kind. The clothing showed the same extraordinary skill in the making as the clothes of the child's doll. But the whole doll was extraordinary in its fidelity to life.

I saw now that the dangling leg was not held by a thread. It was held by a

What those things were I did not know—but I knew they must not catch me!

wire. Evidently the doll had been molded upon wire framework. I walked over to my instrument cabinet, and selected a surgical saw and a couple of knives.

"Wait a minute, doc." McCann had been following my movements. "You going to cut this thing apart?"

I nodded. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a heavy hunting knife. Before I could stop him, he brought the blade down like an ax across the neck of the Peters doll. It cut through cleanly. He took the head and twisted it. A wire snapped. He dropped the head on the table and tossed the body to me. The head rolled. It came to rest against the cord he had called the witch's ladder.

The head seemed to twist and to look up at us. I thought for an instant the eyes flared with a hellish fire, the features contorted, the malignancy intensified—as I had seen it intensify upon Peters living face . . . a trick of the light, of course. . . . I turned to McCann and swore.

"Why did you do that?"

"You're worth more to the boss than I am," he answered cryptically.

I did not answer. I cut open the decapitated body of the doll. As I had suspected, it had been built upon wire framework. As I cut away the encasing material, I found this framework was a single wire, or a single metal strand, and that as cunningly as the doll's body had been shaped, just as cunningly had this wire been twisted into an outline of the human skeleton!

Not, of course, with minute fidelity, but amazingly complete . . . there were no joints nor articulations . . . the substance of which the doll was made was astonishingly pliant . . . the little hands flexible . . it was horribly like dissecting some manikin rather than a doll. . . .

I glanced toward the severed head. McCann was bending over it, staring down into its eyes, his own not more than a few inches away from the malignantly glinting blue crystals. His hands clutched the table edge and I saw that they were strained and tense as though he were making a violent effort to push himself away. When he had tossed the head upon the table it had come to rest against the knotted cord. But now that cord was twisted around the doll's severed neck and around its forehead as though it were a small serpent!

And distinctly I saw that McCann's face was moving closer . . . slowly closer to that tiny one . . . as though it were being drawn to it . . . and that in the little face a living evil was concentrated, and that McCann's face was steeped in fascinated horror. . . .

"McCann!" I cried, and thrust an arm under his chin, jerking back his head. And as I did this I could have sworn the doll's eyes turned to me with a glare of hellish hatred and that its lips writhed.

McCann staggered back. He looked at me for a moment as though dazed, and then leaped to the table. He picked up the doll's head, dashed it to the floor and brought his heel down upon it again and again, like one stamping out the life of a venomous spider. Before he ceased, the head was a shapeless blotch, all semblance of humanity or anything else crushed out of it—but within it the two blue crystals that had been its eyes still glinted, and the corded knots of the witch's ladder still wound through it.

"Lord! It was . . drawing me down to it. . . ."

McCann lighted a cigarette with shaking hand, tossed the match away. The match fell upon what had been the doll's head.

There followed, simultaneously, a brilliant flash, a disconcerting sobbing sound and a wave of intense heat. Where the crushed head had been there was now only an irregularly charred spot upon the polished wood. Within it lay the blue crystals that had been the eyes of the doll—lusterless and blackened. The knotted cord had vanished

"Look!" whispered McCann.

The body of the doll had disappeared. Upon the table was a nauseous puddle of

black waxy liquid out of which lifted the ribs of the wire skeleton!

The annex phone rang; mechanically I answered it.

"Yes," I said. "What is it?"

"Mr. Ricori, sir. He's out of the coma. He's awake!"

I turned to McCann.

"Ricori's come through!"

"Yip!" He gripped my shoulders with a shout—then drew a step away, a touch of awe apparent on his gangster face.

"Yeah?" said McCann. "He came through when I burned the knots! It freed him! It's you an' me that's got to watch our step now!"

CHAPTER IX

Nurse Walters' Diary

HURRIEDLY I took McCann up with me to Ricori's bedside. Confrontation with his chief would be the supreme test, I felt; settling one way or another and finally all my doubts as to his sincerity. For I had realized, almost immediately, that bizarre as had been the occurrences I have just narrated, each and all of them could have been a part of the elaborate hocus-pocus with which I had tentatively charged the gunman.

The cutting off of the doll's head could have been a dramatic gesture designed to impress my imagination. It was he who had called my attention to the sinister reputation of the knotted cord. It was he who had found the pin. His fascination by the severed head might have been assumed. And the tossing of the match a calculated action designed to destroy evidence.

And yet—it was difficult to credit McCann with being so consummate an actor, so subtle a plotter. Ah, but he could be following the instructions of another mind capable of such subtleties. I wanted to trust McCann. I hoped that he would pass the test in triumph. Very earnestly I hoped it.

The test was ordained to failure. Ricori was fully conscious, wide awake, his mind probably as alert and sane as ever. But the lines of communication were still down. His mind had been freed but not his body. The paralysis persisted, forbidding any muscular movements except the deep-seated unconscious reflexes essential to the continuance of life. He could not speak. His eyes looked up at me, bright and intelligent, from an expressionless face—looked up at McCann with the same unchanging stare.

McCann whispered: "Can he hear?"

"I think so, but he has no way of telling us."

The gunman knelt beside the bed and took Ricori's hands in his. He said, clearly: "Everything's all right, boss. We're all on the job."

Not the utterance nor the behavior of a guilty man—but then I had told him Ricori could not answer. I said to Ricori:

"You're coming through splendidly. You had a severe shock, and I know the cause. I'd rather you were this way for a day or so than able to move about. I have a perfectly good medical reason for this. Don't worry, don't fret, try not to think of anything unpleasant. Let your mind relax. I'm going to give you a mild hypo. Don't fight it. Let yourself sleep."

I gave him the hypodermic, and watched with satisfaction its quick effect. It convinced me that he had heard.

I returned to my study with McCann. I was doing some hard thinking. There was no knowing how long Ricori would remain in the grip of the paralysis. He might awaken fully restored, or it might hold him for days. In the meantime there were three things I felt it necessary to ascertain. The first, that a thorough watch was being kept upon the place where Ricori had gotten the doll; second, that everything possible be found out about the two women McCann had described; third, what it was that had made Ricori go there. I had determined to take the gunman's story of the happenings at the store at

their face value—for the moment at least. At the same time, I did not want to admit him into my confidence any more than was necessary.

"McCANN," I began, "have you arranged to keep the doll store under constant surveillance, as we agreed last night?"

"You bet. A flea couldn't hop in or out without being spotted."

"Any reports?"

"The boys ringed the joint close to midnight. The front's all dark. There's a building in the back an' a space between it an' the rear of the joint. There's a window with a heavy shutter, but there's a line of light under it, an' they know somebody's inside. About two o'clock this fish-white gal comes slipping up the street and lets herself in. The boys at the back hear a terrific squalling, an' then the light goes out. This morning the gal opens the shop. After a while the hag shows up too. They're covered all right."

"What have you found out about them?"

"The hag calls herself Mme. Mandilip. The gal's her niece. Or so she says. They rode in about eight months since. Nobody knows where from. Pay their bills regular. Seem to have plenty of money. Niece does all the marketing. The old woman never goes out. Keep to themselves like a pair of clams. Have strictly nothing to do with the neighbors. The hag has a bunch of special customers—rich looking people many of them. Does two kinds of trade, it seems—regular dolls an' what goes with 'em, an' special dolls which they say the old woman's a wonder at. Neighbors ain't a bit fond of 'em. Some of 'em think she's handling dope. That's all—yet."

Special dolls. Rich people. Rich people like the spinster Bailey, the banker Marshall? Regular dolls—for people like the acrobat, the bricklayer? But these might have been "special" too, in ways McCann could not know.

"There's the store," he continued. "Back of it two or three rooms. Upstairs a big room like a storeroom. They rent the whole place. The hag an' the wench they live in the rooms behind the store."

"Good work!" I applauded, and hesitated— "McCann, did the doll remind you of somebody?"

He studied me with narrowed eyes.

"*You* tell *me*," he said at last, dryly.

"Well— I thought it resembled Peters."

"*Thought it resembled!*" He exploded. "Resembled—nothing! It was the lick-an'-spit of Peters!"

"Yet you said nothing to me of that. Why?" I asked suspiciously.

"Well, I'm hanged—" he began, then caught himself. "I knowed you seen it. I thought you kept quiet account of Shevlin, an' I followed your lead. Afterwards you were so busy putting me through the jumps there wasn't a chance."

"Whoever made that doll must have known Peters quite well." I passed over this dig. "Peters must have sat for the doll as one sits for an artist or a sculptor. Why did he do it? When did he do it? Why did anyone desire to make a doll like him?"

"Let me work on the hag for an hour an' I'll tell you," he answered, grimly.

"No," I shook my head. "Nothing of that sort until Ricori can talk. But maybe we can get some light in another way. Ricori had a purpose in going to that store. I know what it was. I do not know what caused him to go. I have reason to believe it was information he gained from Peters' sister. Do you know her well enough to visit her and to draw from her what it was she told Ricori yesterday? Casually—tactfully—without telling her of Ricori's illness?"

He said bluntly: "Not without you give me more of a lead—Mollie's no fool."

"Very well. I am not aware whether Ricori told you, but the Darnley woman is dead. We think there is a connection between her death and Peters' death. We think that it has something to do with the love of both of them for Mollie's baby.

The Darnley woman died precisely as Peters did—"

He whispered—"You mean with the same—trimmings?"

"Yes. We had reason to think that both might have picked up the—the disease—in the same place. Ricori thought that perhaps Mollie might know something which would identify that place. A place where both of them might have gone, not necessarily at the same time, and have been exposed to—the infection. Maybe even a deliberate infection by some ill-disposed person. Quite evidently what Ricori learned from Mollie sent him to the Mandilips. There is one awkward thing, however—unless he told her yesterday, she does not know her brother is dead."

"That's right," he nodded. "He gave orders about that."

"If he did not tell her, you must not."

"You're holding back quite a lot from me, ain't you, doc?" He stood up to go.

"Yes," I said frankly. "But I've told you enough."

"Yeah? Well, maybe." He regarded me soberly. "Anyway, I'll soon know if the boss broke the news to Mollie. If he did, it opens up the talk natural. If he didn't—well, I'll call you up after I've talked to her. *Hasta luega.*"

With this half-mocking adieu he took his departure. I went over to the remains of the doll upon the table. The nauseous puddle had hardened. In hardening it had roughly assumed the aspect of a flattened human body. It had a peculiarly unpleasant appearance, with the miniature ribs and the snapped wire of the spine glinting above it. I was overcoming my reluctance to collect the mess for analysis when Braile came in. I was so full of Ricori's awakening, and of what had occurred, that it was some time before I noticed his pallor and gravity. I stopped airing my doubts regarding McCann to ask him what was the matter.

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"I woke up this morning thinking of Harriet," he said. "I knew the 4-9-1-code, if it was a code, could not have meant Diana. Suddenly it struck me that it might mean diary. The idea kept haunting me. When I had a chance I took Robbins and went to the apartment. We searched, and found Harriet's diary. Here it is."

He handed me a little red-bound book. He said:

"I've gone through it."

I opened the book. I set down the parts of it pertinent to the matter under review:

NOV. 3. Had a queer sort of experience today. Dropped down to Battery Park to look at the new fishes in the Aquarium. Had an hour or so afterwards and went poking around some of the old streets, looking for something to take home to Diana. Found the oddest little shop. Quaint and old looking with some of the loveliest dolls and dolls' clothes in the window I've ever seen. I stood looking at them and peering into the shop through the window.

There was a girl in the shop. Her back was turned to me. She turned suddenly and looked at me. She gave me the queerest kind of shock. Her face was white, without any color whatsoever, and her eyes were wide and sort of staring and frightened. She had a lot of hair, all ashen-blond and piled up on her head. She was the strangest looking girl I think I've ever seen. She stared at me for a full minute and I at her. Then she shook her head violently and made motions with her hands for me to go away.

I was so astonished I could hardly believe my eyes. I was about to go in and ask her what on earth was the matter with her, when I looked at my watch and found I had just time to get back to the hospital.

I looked into the shop again and saw a door at the back beginning slowly to open. The girl made one last, and it almost seemed *despairing*, gesture. There was something about it that suddenly made me want to run. But I didn't. I did walk away though. I've puzzled about the thing all day. Also, besides being curious, I'm a bit angry. The dolls and clothes are beautiful. What's wrong with me as a customer? I'm going to find out.

Nov. 5. I went back to the doll shop on Allen Street this afternoon. The mystery deepens. Only I don't think it's much of a mystery. I think the poor thing is a bit crazy. I didn't stop to look in the window but went right in the door.

The white-faced girl was at a little counter at the back. When she saw me her eyes looked more frightened than ever and I could see her tremble.

I went up to her, and she whispered: "Oh, why did you come back? I told you to go away!"

I laughed. I couldn't help it, and I said: "You're the queerest shopkeeper I ever met. Don't you want people to buy your things?"

She said low and very quickly: "It's too late. You can't go now. But don't touch anything. Don't touch anything she gives you. Don't touch anything she points out to you." And then in the most everyday way she said quite clearly: "Is there anything I can show you? We have everything for dolls."

The transition was so abrupt that it was startling. Then I saw that a door had opened in the back of the shop, the same door I had seen opening before, and that a woman was standing in it looking at me.

I gaped at her I don't how how long. She was truly extraordinary. She must be almost six feet and heavy with enormous breasts. Not fat. Powerful. She has a long face and her skin is brown. She has a distinct mustache and a mop of iron-gray hair. It was her eyes that held me spellbound. They are simply enormous, black and so full of life! She must have a tremendous vitality. Or maybe it is the contrast with the white girl, who seems to be drained of life. No, I'm sure she has a most unusual vitality.

I had the queerest thrill when she was looking at me. I thought, nonsensically: "What big eyes you have, grandma!" "The better to see you with, my dear!" "What big teeth you have, grandma!" "The better to eat you with, my dear!" (*I'm not so sure, though, that it was all nonsense.*) And she really has big teeth, strong and yellow.

I said, quite stupidly: "How do you do?" She smiled and touched me with her hand, and I felt another queer thrill. Her hands are the most beautiful I ever saw. So beautiful, they are uncanny. Long, with tapering fingers, and so white. Like the hands El Greco or Botticelli put on their women. I suppose that is what gave me the odd shock. They don't seem to belong to her immense coarse body at all. But neither do the eyes. The hands and the eyes go together. Yes, that's it.

SHE smiled and said: "You love beautiful things." Her voice belongs to hands and eyes. A deep, rich, glowing contralto. I could feel it go through me like an organ chord. I nodded. She said "Then you shall see them, my dear Come."

She paid no attention to the girl. She turned to the door, and I followed her As I went through the door I looked back at the girl. She appeared more frightened than ever and I saw her lips form the word—"Remember."

The room she led me into was—well, I can't describe it. It is like her eyes and hands and voice. When I went into it I had the strange feeling that I was no longer in New York. Nor in America Nor anywhere on earth, for that matter I had the feeling that the only real place that existed was the room. It was frightening. The room was larger than it seemed possible it could be, judging from the size of the store. Perhaps it was the light that made it seem so. A soft mellow, dusky light. It is exquisitely panelled, even the ceiling.

On one side there is nothing but these beautiful old dark panels with carvings in very low relief covering them. There is a fireplace and a fire was burning in it. It was unusually warm, but the warmth was not oppressive. There was a faint fragrant odor, probably from the burning wood. The furniture is old and exquisite too, but unfamiliar. There are some tapestries, clearly ancient. It is curious, but I find it difficult to recall clearly just what is in that room. All that is clear is its unfamiliar beauty. I do remember clearly an immense table, and I recall thinking of it as a "baronial board." And I remember intensely the round mirror, and—I don't like to think of that.

I found myself telling her all about myself and about Diana, and how she loved beautiful things. She listened, and said in that deep sweet voice. "She shall have one beautiful thing, my dear." She went to a cabinet, and came to me with the loveliest doll I have ever seen. It made me gasp when I thought how Di would love it. A little baby doll, and so lifelike.

"Would she like that?" she asked.

I said: "But I could never afford such a treasure. I'm poor."

And she laughed and said: "But I am not poor. This shall be yours when I have finished dressing it."

It was rude, but I could not help saying: "You must be very, very rich to have all these lovely things. I wonder why you keep a doll store." And she laughed again and said: "Just to meet nice people like you, my dear."

It was then I had the peculiar experience with the mirror. It was round and I had looked and looked at it because it was like, I thought, the half of an immense globule of clearest water. Its frame was brown wood elaborately carved, and now and then the reflection of the carvings seemed to dance in the mirror, like vegetation on the edge of a woodland pool when a breeze ruffles it. I had been wanting to look at it, and all at once the desire became irresistible.

I walked to the mirror. I could see the

whole room reflected in it. Just as though I were looking not at its image or my own image but into another similar room with a similar me peering out. And then there was a wavering and the reflection of the room became misty, although the reflection of myself was perfectly clear. Then I could see only myself, and I seemed to be getting smaller and smaller until I was no bigger than a large doll. I brought my face closer and the little face thrust itself forward. I shook my head and smiled, and it did the same. It was my reflection—but so small! And suddenly I felt frightened and shut my eyes tight. And when I looked in the mirror again everything was as it had been before.

I looked at my watch and was appalled at the time I had spent. I arose to go, still with the panicky feeling at my heart. She said, "Visit me again tomorrow, my dear. I will have the doll ready for you." I thanked her and said I would. She went with me to the door of the shop. The girl did not look at me as I passed through.

Her name is Mme. Mandilip. I am not going to her tomorrow, or ever again. She fascinates me but she makes me afraid. I don't like the way I felt before the round mirror. And when I first looked into it and saw the whole room reflected, why didn't I see her image in it? I did not! And although the room was lighted, I can't remember seeing any windows or lamps. And that girl! And yet—Di would love the doll so!

NOV. 7. Queer how difficult it is to keep my resolution not to return to Mme. Mandilip. It makes me so restless! Last night I had a terrifying dream. I thought I was back in that room. I could see it distinctly. And suddenly I realized I *was looking out into it.* And that I was *inside the mirror.* I knew I was little. Like a doll. I was frightened and I beat against it, and fluttered against it like a moth against a window pane. Then I saw two beautiful long white hands stretching out to me. They opened the mirror and caught me, and I struggled and fought and tried to get away. I awoke wtih my heart beating so hard it nigh smothered me. Di says I was crying out, "No! No! I won't! No, I won't!" over and over. She threw a pillow at me and I suppose that's what awakened me.

Today I left the hospital at four, intending to go right home. I don't know what I could have been thinking about, but whatever it was I must have been mighty preoccupied. I woke up to find myself in the subway station just getting on a Bowling Green train. That would have taken me to the Battery. I suppose absent-mindedly I had set out for Mme. Mandilip's. It gave me such a start that I almost *ran* out of the station and up to the street. I think I'm acting very stupidly. I always have prided myself on my common sense. I think I must consult Dr. Braile and see whether I'm becoming neurotic.

There's no earthly reason why I should not go to see Mme. Mandilip. She is most interesting and certainly showed she liked me. It was so gracious of her to offer me that lovely doll. She must think me ungrateful and rude. And it would please Di so. When I think of how I've been feeling about the mirror it makes me feel as childish as Alice in Wonderland—or Through the Looking-glass, rather. Mirrors or any other reflecting surfaces make you see queer things sometimes. Probably the heat and the fragrance had a lot to do with it. I *really* don't know that Mme. Mandilip *wasn't* reflected. I was too intent upon looking at myself.

It's too absurd to run away and hide like a child from a witch. Yet that's precisely what I'm doing. If it weren't for that girl—but she *certainly* is a neurotic! I want to go, and I just don't see why I'm behaving so.

Nov. 10. Well, I'm glad I didn't persist in that ridiculous idea. Mme. Mandilip is *wonderful.* Of course, there are

some queer things I don't understand, but that's because she is so different from anyone I've ever met and because when I get inside her room life becomes so different. When I leave, it's like going out of some enchanted castle into the prosiest kind of world.

Yesterday I determined I'd go to see her straight from the hospital. The moment I made up my mind I felt as though a cloud had lifted from it. Gayer and happier than I've been for a week. When I went in the store the white girl—her name is Laschna—stared at me as though she was going to cry. She said, in the oddest choked voice, "Remember that I tried to save you!"

It seemed so funny that I laughed and laughed. Then Mme. Mandilip opened the door, and when I looked at her eyes and heard her voice I knew why I was so light-hearted — it was like coming home after the most *awful* siege of homesickness. The lovely room welcomed me. It really did. It's the only way I can describe it. I have the queer feeling that the room is as alive as Mme. Mandilip. That it is a part of her—or rather, a part of the part of her that are her eyes and hands and voice.

She didn't ask me why I had stayed away. She brought out the doll. It is more wonderful than ever. She has still some work to do on it. We sat and talked, and then she said, "I'd like to make a doll of you, my dear." Those were her exact words, and for just an instant I had a frightened feeling because I remembered my dream and saw myself fluttering inside the mirror and trying to get out. And then I realized it was just her way of speaking, and that she meant she would like to make a doll that looked like me. So I laughed and said, "Of course you can make a doll of me, Mme. Mandilip." I wonder what nationality she is.

She laughed with me, her big eyes bigger than ever and very bright. She brought out some wax and began to model my head. Those beautiful long fingers worked rapidly as though each of them was a little artist in itself. I watched them, fascinated. I began to get sleepy, and sleepier and sleepier. She said, "My dear, I *do* wish you'd take off your clothes and let me model your whole body. Don't be shocked. I'm just an old woman."

I didn't mind at all, and I said sleepily, "Why, of course you can." And I stood on a little stool and watched the wax taking shape under those white fingers until it had become a small and almost perfect copy of me. I knew it was perfect, although I was so sleepy I could hardly see it. I was so sleeepy, Mme. Mandilip had to help me dress.

And then I must have gone sound asleep, because I woke up with quite a start to find her patting my hands and saying, "I'm sorry I tired you, child. Stay if you wish. But if you must go, it is growing late."

I looked at my watch and I was still so sleepy I could hardly see it, but I knew it *was* dreadfully late. Then Mme. Mandilip pressed her hands over my eyes and suddenly I was wide awake.

She said, "Come tomorrow and take the doll." I said, "I must pay you what I can afford." She said, "You've paid me in full, my dear, by letting me make a doll of you." Then we both laughed and I hurried out. The white girl was busy with someone, but I called "*Au 'voir*" to her. Probably she didn't hear me, for she didn't answer.

NOV. 11. I have the doll and Diana is crazy about it! How glad I am I didn't surrender to that silly morbid feeling. Di has never had anything that has given her such happiness. She adores it! Sat again for Mme. Mandilip this afternoon for the finishing touches on my own doll. She is a *genius. Truly* a genius! I wonder more than ever why she is content to run a little shop. She surely could take her place among the greatest of artists.

The doll literally is *me*. She asked me

if she could cut some of my hair for its head and of course I let her. She tells me this doll is not the real doll she is going to make of me. That will be much larger. This is just the model from which she will work. I told her I thought this was perfect but she said the other would be less perishable material. Maybe she will give me this one after she is finished with it. I was so anxious to take the baby doll home to Di that I didn't stay long. I smiled and spoke to Laschna as I went out, and she nodded to me although not very cordially. I wonder if she can be jealous.

Nov. 13. This is the first time I have felt like writing since that dreadful case of Mr. Peters on the morning of the 11th. I had just finished writing about Di's doll when the hospital called to say they wanted me on duty that night. Of course, I said I could come. Oh, but I wish I hadn't. I'll never forget that dreadful death. Never! I don't want to write or think about it. When I came home that morning I could not sleep, and I tossed and tossed trying to get the memory of his face out of my mind.

I thought I had schooled myself too well to be affected by any patient. But there was something— Then I thought that if there was anyone who could help me forget, it would be Mme. Mandilip. So about two o'clock I went down to see her.

Madame was in the store with Laschna and seemed surprised to see me so early. And not so pleased as usual, or so I thought, but perhaps it was my nervousness. The moment I entered the lovely room I began to feel better. *Madame* had been doing something with wire on the table but I couldn't see what because she made me sit in a big comfortable chair, saying, "You look tired, child. Sit here and rest until I'm finished and here's an old picture book that will keep you interested."

She gave me a queer old book, long and narrow and it must have been very old because it was on vellum or something and the pictures and their colorings were like some of those books that have come down from the Middle Ages, the kind the old monks used to paint. They were all scenes in forests or gardens and the flowers and trees were the *queerest!* There were no people or anything in them but you had the strangest feeling that if you had just a little better eyes you could see people or something behind them. I mean it was as though they were hiding behind the trees and flowers or among them and looking out at you. I don't know how long I studied the pictures trying and trying to see those hidden folk but at last *madame* called me. I went to the table with the book still in my hand.

She said, "That's for the doll I am making of you. Take it up and see how cleverly it is done." And she pointed to something made of wire on the table.

I reached out to pick it up and then suddenly I saw that it was a skeleton. It was little, like a child's skeleton, and all at once the face of Mr. Peters flashed in my mind and I screamed in a moment of perfectly crazy panic and threw out my hands. The book flew out of my hand and dropped on the little wire skeleton and there was a sharp twang and the skeleton seemed to jump. I recovered myself immediately and I saw that the end of the wire had come loose and had cut the binding of the book and was still stuck in it.

For a moment *madame* was dreadfully angry. She caught my arm and squeezed it so it hurt and her eyes were furious and she said in the strangest voice, "Why did you do that? Answer me. Why?" And she actually shook me. I don't blame her now although then she really did frighten me, because she must have thought I did it deliberately.

Then she saw how I was trembling and her eyes and voice became gentle and she said, "Something is troubling you, my dear. Tell me and perhaps I can help you." She made me lie down upon a divan and sat beside me and stroked

my hair and forehead and though I never discuss cases to others I found myself pouring out the whole story of the Peters case.

She asked who was the man who had brought him to the hospital and I said Dr. Lowell called him Ricori and I supposed he was the notorious gangster. Her hands made me feel quiet and nice and sleepy and I told her about Dr. Lowell and how great a doctor he is and how terribly in secret I am in love with Dr. B. I'm sorry I told her about the case. Never have I done such a thing. But I was so shaken, and once I had begun I seemed to have to tell her everything. Everything in my mind was so distorted that once when I had lifted my head to look at her I actually thought she was *gloating*. That shows how little I was like myself!

After I had finished she told me to lie there and sleep and she would waken me when I wished. So I said I must be going at four. I went right to sleep and woke up feeling rested and fine. When I went out the little skeleton and book were still on the table, and I said I was so sorry about the book.

She said, "Better the book than your hand, my dear. The wire might have snapped loose while you were handling it and given you a nasty cut." She wants me to bring down my nurse's dress so she can make a little one like it for the new doll.

NOV. 14. I wish I'd never gone to Mme. Mandilip's. I wouldn't have had my foot scalded. But that's not the real reason I'm sorry. I couldn't put it in words if I tried. But I do wish I *hadn't*. I took the nurse's costume down to her this afternoon. She made a little model of it very quickly. She was gay and sang me some of the most haunting little songs . . I couldn't understand the words.

She laughed when I asked her what the language was and said, "The language of the people who peeped at you from the pictures of the book, my dear."

That was a strange thing to say. And how did she know I thought there were people hidden in the pictures? I *do* wish I'd never gone there. She brewed some tea and poured cups for us. And then just as she was handing me mine her elbow struck the teapot and overturned it and the scalding tea poured right down over my right foot. It pained atrociously.

She took off the shoe and stripped off the stocking and spread salve of some sort over the scald. She said it would take out the pain and heal it immediately. It did stop the pain, and when I came home I could hardly believe my eyes. Job wouldn't believe it had really been scalded.

Mme. Mandilip was terribly distressed about it. At least she *seemed* to be. I wonder why she didn't go to the door with me as usual. She didn't. She stayed in the room. The white girl Laschna was close to the door when I went out into the store. She looked at the bandage on my foot and I told her it had been scalded but *madame* had dressed it. She didn't even say she was sorry.

As I went out I looked at her and said a bit angrily, "Good-*by*." Her eyes filled with tears and she looked at me in the strangest way and shook her head and said "*Au 'voir!*" I looked at her again as I shut the door and the tears were rolling down her cheeks. I wonder why?

I wish I had never gone to Mme. Mandilip's!

Nov. 15. Foot all healed. I haven't the slightest desire to return to Mme. Mandilip's. I shall never go there again. I wish I could destroy that doll she gave me. But it would break Di's heart.

Nov. 20. Still no desire to see her. I find I'm forgetting all about her. The only time I think of her is when I see Di's doll. I'm *glad*. So glad I want to dance and sing. I'll never see her again. But, dear heaven, how I wish I never *had* seen her! And still I don't know why.

This was the last reference to Mme. Mandilip in Nurse Walters' diary. She died on the morning of November 25.

CHAPTER X

END OF THE PETERS DOLL

BRAILE had been watching me closely. I met his questioning gaze, and tried to conceal the perturbation which the diary had aroused. I said:

"I never knew Walters had so imaginative a mind."

He flushed and asked angrily: "You think she was fictionizing?"

"Not fictionizing exactly. Observing a series of ordinary occurrences through the glamour of a too active imagination."

He said, incredulously: "You do not realize that what she has written is an authentic even though an unconscious description of an amazing piece of hypnotism?"

"The possibility did occur to me," I answered tartly. "But I find no actual evidence to support it. I do perceive, however, that Walters was not so well balanced as I had supposed her. I find evidence that she was surprisingly emotional; that on at least one of her visits to this Mme. Mandilip she was plainly overwrought and in an extreme of nervous instability. I refer to her indiscreet discussion of the Peters case, after she had been warned by me, you will remember, to say nothing of it to anyone whatsoever."

"I remember it so well," he said, "that when I came to that part of the diary I had no further doubt of the hypnotism. Nevertheless, go on."

"In considering two possible causes for any action, it is desirable to accept the more reasonable. Consider the actual facts, Braile. Walters lays stress upon the odd conduct and warnings of the girl.

"She admits the girl is a neurotic. Well, the conduct she describes is exactly what we would expect from a neurotic. Walters is attracted by the dolls and goes in to price them, as any one would. She is acting under no compulsion.

"She meets a woman whose physical characteristics stimulate her imagination and arouse her emotionalism. She confides in her. This woman, evidently also of the emotional type, likes her and gives her a doll. This woman is an artist. She sees in Walters a desirable model. She asks her to pose—still no compulsion and a natural request—and Walters does pose.

"The woman has her technique like all artists, and part of it is to make skeletons as the framework of her dolls—a natural and intelligent procedure. The sight of the skeleton suggests death to Walters, and the suggestion of death brings up the image of Peters, which has been powerfully impressed upon her imagination. She becomes momentarily hysterical—again evidence of her overwrought condition.

"She takes tea with the doll-maker and accidentally is scalded. Naturally this arouses the solicitude of her hostess, who dresses the scald with some salve in whose efficacy she believes. And that is all! Where in this entirely commonplace sequence of events is there evidence that Walters was hypnotized? And finally, assuming that she was hypnotized, where is there any evidence of motive?"

"The doll-maker herself gave it," he answered—"*'to make a doll of you, my dear!'*"

I HAD almost convinced myself by my argument, and this remark exasperated me.

"I suppose," I said, "you would have me believe that once lured into the shop, Walters was compelled by occult arts to return until this Mme. Mandilip's devilish purpose was accomplished. That the compassionate shopgirl tried to save Walters from what the old melodramas called a fate worse than death—although

Braile shrieked once as the chandelier swayed and the doll-devil ripped at his throat

not precisely the fate they meant; that the doll she was to be given for her sister was the bait on the hook of the sorceress; that it was necessary Walters be wounded so the witch's salve could be applied; that it was the salve which carried the unknown death. That the first trap failing, the accident of the teakettle was contrived and was successful. And that now Walters' soul is fluttering inside the witch's mirror, just as she dreamed. And all this, my dear Braile, is most outrageous superstition!"

"Ah!" he said obliquely. "So those possibilities *did* occur to you, after all? Your mind is not so fossilized as, a few moments ago, I supposed."

I became still more exasperated.

"Is it your theory that from the moment Walters entered the store, every occurrence she has narrated was designed to give this Mme. Mandilip possession of her soul—a design that was consummated by Walters' death?"

He hesitated, then said: "In essence—yes."

"A soul!" I mused, sardonically. "But I have never seen a soul. I know of no one whose evidence I would credit who *has* seen a soul. What is a soul—if it exists? Is it ponderable? Material? If your theory is correct, it must be. How could one gain possession of something which is both imponderable and nonmaterial? How would one know one had it if it could not be seen nor weighed, felt nor measured, nor heard? If not material, how could it be constrained, directed, confined? As you would have me believe has been done with Walters' soul by this doll-maker.

"If material, then where does it reside in the body? Within the brain? I have operated upon scores and never yet have

I opened any secret chamber housing this mysterious occupant. Little cells, far more complicated in their workings than any machinery ever devised, changing their possessor's mentality, moods, reason, emotion, personality—according to whether the little cells are functioning well or ill. Those I have found, Braile—but never a soul. Surgeons have thoroughly explored the balance of the body. They have found no secret temple within it. Show me a soul, Braile, and I'll believe in—Mme. Mandilip."

He studied me in silence, then said:

"Now I understand. It's hit you pretty hard, too, hasn't it? You're doing a little beating of your own against the mirror, aren't you? Well, I've had a struggle to thrust aside what I've been taught is reality – and to admit there may be something else just as real. This matter, Lowell, is extra-medical, outside the science we know. Until we admit it, however, we'll get nowhere.

"There are still two points I'd like to take up. Peters and the Darnley woman died the same kind of death. Ricori finds that they both had dealings with Mme Mandilip—or so we can assume. He visits her and narrowly escapes death. Harriet visits her, and dies as Darnley and Peters did. Reasonably, therefore, doesn't all this point to Mme. Mandilip as a possible source of the evil that overtook the four?"

"Certainly," I answered.

"Then it must follow that there *could* have been real cause for the fear and forebodings of Harriet. That there *could* have existed a cause other than emotionalism and too much imagination—even though Harriet were unaware of these circumstances."

Too late I realized the dilemma into which my admission had put me, but I could only reply in the affirmative.

"THE second point is Harriet's loss of all desire to return to the dollmaker after the teapot incident. Did that strike you as curious?"

"No. If Harriet were emotionally unstable, the shock would automatically set itself up as an inhibition. A subconscious barrier. Unless they are masochists, such types do not like to return to the scene of an unpleasant experience."

"Did you notice her remark that after the scalding the dollmaker did not accompany her to the door of the store? And that it was the first time she had neglected to do so?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"This. If the application of the salve constituted the final act, and thereafter death became inevitable, it might be highly embarrassing to Mme. Mandilip to have her victim going in and out of her shop during the time it took the poison to kill. The seizure might even take place there, and lead to dangerous questions. The clever thing therefore would be to cause the unsuspecting sacrifice to lose all interest in her; indeed, feel a repulsion against her, or, if possible, forget her. This could be easily accomplished by post-hypnotic suggestion, and Mme. Mandilip had every opportunity for it. Would this not explain Harriet's distaste as logically as imagination –or emotionalism?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"And so," he said, "we have explained the woman's failure to go to the door with Harriet that day. Her plot had succeeded. It was all over. She had planted her suggestion. No need now for any further contact with Harriet. She lets her go, unaccompanied. Significant symbolism of finality!"

He sat, thinking.

"No need to meet Harriet again," he half whispered, "till after death!"

I said, startled: "What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind," he answered.

He crossed to the charred spot on the floor and picked up the heat-blasted crystals. They were about twice the size of olive pits and apparently of some composite. He walked to the table and

looked down upon the grotesque figure with its skeleton ribs.

"Suppose the heat melted it?" he asked, and reached to lift the skeleton. It held fast, and he gave it a sharp tug. There was a shrill twanging sound, and he dropped it with a startled oath. The skeleton fell to the floor. It writhed, the single wire of which it was made uncoiling.

Uncoiling, it glided over the floor like a serpent and came to rest, quivering.

We looked from it to the table.

The substance that had resembled a sprawling, flattened, headless body was gone.

In its place was a film of fine gray dust which swirled and eddied for a moment in some unfelt draft—and then it, too, was gone!

CHAPTER XI

NURSE'S CAP

"SHE knows how to get rid of the evidence!"

Braile laughed—but there was no mirth in his laughter. I said nothing. It was the same thought I had held of McCann when the doll's head had vanished. But McCann could not be suspected of this. Evading any further discussion of the matter, we went to the annex to see Ricori.

There were two new guards on watch at his door. They arose politely and spoke to us pleasantly. We entered softly. Ricori had slipped out of the drug into a natural sleep. He was breathing easily, peacefully, in deep and healing slumber. The room is a quiet one at the rear, overlooking a little inclosed garden. Both houses are old-fashioned, dating back to a far more peaceful New York, and sturdy vines of Virginia creepers climb up it both at front and back. I cautioned the nurse to maintain utmost quiet, arranging her light so that it would cast only the slightest gleam upon Ricori; in going out I similarly cautioned the guards, telling them that their chief's speedy recovery to health might depend upon it.

It was now after six. I asked Braile to stay for dinner, and afterward to drop in on my patients at the hospital and to call me up if he thought it worth while. I wanted to stay at home and await Ricori's awakening, should it occur.

We had almost finished dinner when the telephone rang. Braile answered.

"McCann," he said. I went to the instrument.

"Hello, McCann. This is Dr. Lowell."

"How's the boss?"

"Better. I'm expecting him to awaken any moment and to be able to talk." I listened intently to catch whatever reaction he might betray to this news.

"That's great, doc!" I could detect nothing but deepest satisfaction in his voice. "Listen, doc, I seen Mollie an' I got some news. Dropped round on her right after I left you. Found Gilmore—that's her husband—home, an' that gave me a break. Said I'd come in to ask her how she'd like a little ride. She was tickled an' we left Gil home with the kid—"

"Does she know of Peters' death?" I interrupted.

"Nope. An' I didn't tell her. Now listen. I told you Horty— What? Why, Missus Darnley, Jim Wilson's gal. Yeah. Let me talk, will you? I told you Horty was nuts on Mollie's kid. Early last month Horty comes in with a swell doll for the kid. Also she's nursing a sore hand she says she gets at the same place she got the doll. The woman she got the doll from gave it to her, she tells Mollie—

"What? No, gave her the doll, not the hand. Say, doc, ain't I speaking clear? Yeah, she gets her hand hurt where she got the doll. That's what I said. The woman fixes it up for her. She gives her the doll for nothing, Horty tells Mollie, because she thought Horty was so pretty an' for posing for her. Yeah, posing for her, making a statue of her or something. That makes a hit with Horty because she don't hate herself an' she

thinks this doll woman a lalapaloozer. Yeah, a lalapaloozer—a corker! Yeah.

"About a week later, Tom—that's Peters—shows up while Horty's there an sees the doll. Tom's a mite jealous of Horty with the kid an' asks her where she got it. She tells him a Mme. Mandilip an' where, an' Tom he says as this is a gal-doll she needs company so he'll go an' get a boy-doll. About a week after this Tom turns up with a boy-doll the lick-an'-spit of Horty's. Mollie asks him if he pays as much for it as Horty They ain't told him about Horty not paying nothing for it or posing.

"Mollie says Tom looks sort of sheepish but all he says is well, he ain't gone broke on it. She's going to kid him by asking if the doll woman thinks he's so pretty she wants him to pose, but the kid sets up a whoop about the boy-doll an' she forgets it. Tom don't show up again till about the first of this month. He's got a bandage on his hand an Mollie, kidding him, asks him if he got it where he got the doll. He looks surprised an' says yes, but how did you know that? Yeah—yeah, that's what she says he told her.

"What's that? Did the Mandilip woman bandage it for him? I don't know. I guess so, maybe. Mollie didn't say an' I didn't ask. Listen, doc, I told you Mollie's no dummy. What I'm telling you took me two hours to get. Talking about this, talking about that an coming back casual like to what I'm trying to find out.

"I'm afraid to ask too many questions. What? Oh, that's all right, doc. No offense. Yeah, I think it pretty funny myself. But like I'm telling you I'm afraid to go too far. Mollie's too wise.

"Well, when Ricori comes up yesterday he uses the same tactics as me I guess. Anyway, he admires the dolls an' asks her where she gets 'em an' how much they cost an' so on. Remember I told you I stay out in the car while he's there. It's after that he goes home an' does the telephoning an' then beats it to the Mandilip hag. Yeah, that's all. Does it mean anything? Yeah? All right then."

HE WAS silent for a moment or two but I had not heard the click of the receiver. I asked:

"Are you there, McCann?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking." His voice held a wistful note. "I'd sure like to be with you when the boss comes to. But I'd best go down an' see how the hands are getting along with them two Mandilip cows. Maybe I'll call you up if it ain't too late. Good-by, doc."

I walked slowly back to Braile, trying to marshal my disjointed thoughts. I repeated McCann's end of the conversation to him exactly. He did not interrupt me. When I had finished he said, quietly:

"Hortense Darnley goes to the Mandilip woman, is given a doll, is asked to pose, is wounded there, treated there. And dies. Peters goes to the Mandilip woman, gets a doll, is wounded there, is presumably treated there. And dies like Hortense. You see a doll for which, apparently, he has posed. Harriet goes through the same routine. And dies like Hortense and Peters, Now what?"

Suddenly I felt rather old and tired. It is not precisely stimulating to see crumbling what one has long believed to be a fairly well-ordered world of recognized cause and effect. I said wearily:

"I don't know."

He arose and patted my shoulder.

"Get some sleep. The nurse will call you if Ricori wakes. We'll get to the bottom of this thing."

"Even if we fall to it," I said, and smiled.

"Even if we have to fall to it," he repeated, and did not smile.

After Braile had gone I sat for long, thinking. Then, determined to dismiss my thoughts, I tried to read. I was too restless, and soon gave it up. Like the room in which Ricori lay, my study is at the rear, looking down upon the little garden.

I walked over to the window and stared out, unseeingly. More urgent than ever was that feeling of standing before a blank door which it was vitally important to open. I turned back into the study and was surprised to find it was close to ten o'clock. I dimmed my light and lay down upon the comfortable couch. Almost immediately I fell asleep.

I awoke from that sleep with a start, as though someone had spoken in my ear. I sat up listening. There was utter silence around me. And suddenly I was aware that it was a strange silence, unfamiliar and oppressive. A thick, dead silence that filled the study and through which no sound from outside could penetrate.

I jumped to my feet and turned on the lights, full. The silence retreated, seemed to pour out of the room like something tangible. But slowly. Now I could hear the ticking of my clock—ticking out abruptly, as though a silencing cover had been whisked from it. I shook my head impatiently, and walked to the window. I leaned out to breathe the cool night air. I leaned out still more, so that I could see the window of Ricori's room, resting my hand on the trunk of the vine. I felt a tremor along it as though someone were gently shaking it—or as though some small animal were climbing it—

THE window of Ricori's room broke into a square of light. Behind me I heard the shrilling of the annex alarm bell which meant the urgent need of haste. I raced out of the study, up the stairs two at a time, and over.

As I ran into the corridor I saw that the guards were not at the door. The door was open. I stood stock-still on its threshold, incredulous—

One guard crouched beside the window, automatic in hand. The other knelt beside a body on the floor, his pistol pointed toward me. At her table sat the nurse, head bent upon her breast—unconscious or asleep. The bed was empty.

The body on the floor was Ricori.

The guard lowered his gun. I dropped at Ricori's side. He was lying face down, stretched out a few feet from the bed. I turned him over. His face had a pallor of death, but his heart was beating.

"Help me lift him to the bed," I said to the guard. "Then shut the door."

He did so, silently. The man at the window asked from the side of his mouth, never relaxing his watch outward:

"Boss dead?"

"Not quite," I answered, then swore as I seldom do: "What kind of guards are you?"

The man who shut the door gave a mirthless chuckle.

"There's more'n you goin' to ask that, doc."

I gave a glance at the nurse. She still sat huddled in the limp attitude of unconsciousness or deep sleep. I stripped Ricori of his pajamas and went over his body. There was no mark upon him. I gave him an injection of adrenalin. I went over to the nurse and shook her. She did not awaken. I raised her eyelids. The pupils of her eyes were contracted. I flashed a light in them, without response. Her pulse and respiration were slow, but not dangerously so. I let her be for a moment and turned to the guards.

"What happened?"

They looked at each other uneasily. The guard at the window waved his hand, as though bidding the other to do the talking. This guard said, hesitantly:

"We're sitting out there. All at once the house gets awful still. I says to Jack there, 'Sounds like they put a silencer on the dump.' He says, 'Yeah.' We sit listening. Then all at once we hear a thump inside here. Like somebody falling out of bed. We crash the door. There's the boss like you seen him on the floor. There's the nurse asleep like you see her. We glim the alarm and pull it. Then we wait for somebody to come. That's all, ain't it, Jack?"

"Yeah," answered the guard at the

window, tonelessly. "Yeah, I guess that's all."

I looked at him suspiciously.

"You guess that's all? What do you mean—you guess?"

Again they looked at each other.

"Better come clean, Bill," said the guard at the window.

"He won't believe it," said the other.

"And nobody else; anyway, tell him."

The guard Bill said:

"When he crashed the door, we seen something like a couple of cats fighting there beside the window. We didn't see the boss, he was out of range. We had our guns out, but was afraid to shoot for what you told us. Then we heard a funny noise outside like somebody blowing a flute. For two things broke loose and jumped up on the window sill, and out. We jumped to the window. And we didn't see nothing."

"You saw the things at the window. What did they look like then?" I asked.

"You tell him, Jack."

"Dolls!"

A SHIVER went down my back. It was the answer I had been expecting—and dreading. Out the window! I recalled the tremor of the vine when I gripped it. The guard who had closed the door looked at me, and I saw his jaw drop.

"Cripes, Jack!" he gasped. "He believes it!"

I forced myself to speak.

"What kind of dolls?"

The guard at the window answered, more confidently:

"One we couldn't see well. The other looked like one of your nurses if she'd shrunk to about two feet!"

One of my nurses. . .Walters. . .I felt a wave of weakness and sank down on the edge of Ricori's bed.

Something white on the floor at the head of it caught my eye. I stared at it stupidly, then leaned and picked it up.

It was a nurse's cap. A little replica of those my nurses wear. It was about large enough to fit the head of a two-foot doll. . . .

There was something else where it had been. I picked that up.

It was a knotted cord of hair. . .pale ashen hair. . .with nine curious knots spaced at irregular intervals along it. .

The guard named Bill stood looking down at me anxiously.

"Want me to call any of your people, doc?"

"Try to get hold of McCann," I bade him; then spoke to the other guard: "Close the windows and fasten them and pull down the curtains. Then lock the door."

CHAPTER XII

TEMPORARY MADNESS

BILL, Ricori's guard, began to telephone. Stuffing the cap and knotted cord in my pocket I walked over to the nurse. She was rapidly recovering and in a minute or two I had her awake. At first her eyes dwelt on me, puzzled; took in the lighted room and the two men and the puzzlement changed to alarm. She sprang to her feet.

"I didn't see you come in! Did I fall asleep? What's happened?" Her hand went to her throat.

"I'm hoping you can tell us," I said gently.

She stared at me uncomprehendingly. She said, confusedly:

"I don't know. . .it became terribly still. . .I thought I saw something moving at the window. . .then there was a queer, aromatic fragrance. . .and then I looked up to see you bending over me."

I asked: "Can you remember anything of what you saw at the window? The least detail—the least impression. Please try."

She answered, hesitantly: "There was something white. . .I thought someone . . .something. . .was watching me. . . then came the fragrance, like flowers. . . that's all."

Bill hung up the telephone: "All right, doc. They're after McCann. Now what?"

"Miss Butler," I turned to the nurse. "I'm going to relieve you for the balance of the night. Go to bed. And I want you to sleep. I prescribe—" I told her what.

"You're not angry—you don't think I've been careless—"

"No to both." I smiled and patted her shoulder. "The case has taken an unexpected turn, that's all. Now don't ask any more questions."

I walked with her to the door, opened it for her.

"Do exactly as I say."

I closed and locked the door behind her.

I sat beside Ricori. The shock that he had experienced—whatever it might have been – should either cure or kill, I thought grimly. As I watched him, a tremor went through his body. Slowly an arm began to lift, fist clenched. His lips moved. He spoke, in Italian and so swiftly that I could get no word. His arm fell back. I stood up from the bed; the paralysis had gone; he could move and speak. But would he be able to do so when consciousness assumed sway? I left this for the next few hours to decide. I could do nothing else.

"Now listen to me carefully," I said to the two guards. "No matter how strange will seem what I am going to say, you must obey me in every detail —Ricori's life depends upon your doing so. I want one of you to sit close beside me at the table here. I want the other to sit beside Ricori, at the head of the bed and between him and me. If I am asleep and he should awaken, arouse me. If you see any change in his condition, awaken me at once."

They said: "Okay."

"Very well. Now here is the most important thing of all. You must watch me even more closely. Which ever of you sits beside me must not take his eyes off me. If I should go to your chief it would be to do one of three things only—listen to his heart and breathing—lift his eyelids—take his temperature. I mean, of course, if he should be as he now is. If I seem to awaken and attempt to do anything other than these three—stop me. If I resist, make me helpless—tie me up and gag me—no, don't gag me—listen to me and remember what I say. Then telephone to Dr. Braile—here is his number."

"Don't damage me any more than you can help," I said, and smiled.

They stared at each other, plainly disconcerted.

"If you say so, doc—" began the guard Bill, doubtfully.

"I do say so. Do not hesitate. If you should be wrong, I'll not hold it against you."

"The doc knows what he's about, Bill," said the guard Jack.

"Okay, then," said Bill.

I turned out all the lights except that beside the nurse's table. I stretched myself in her chair and adjusted the lamp so my face could be plainly seen. That little white cap I had picked from the floor had shaken me—terribly! I drew it out and placed it in a drawer. The guard Jack took his station beside Ricori. Bill drew up a chair, and sat facing me. I thrust my hand back into my pocket and clutched the knotted cord, closed my eyes, emptied my mind of all thought and relaxed. In abandoning, at least temporarily, my conception of a sane cosmos I had determined to give that of Mme. Mandilip every chance to operate.

Faintly, I heard a clock strike one. I slept.

SOMEWHERE a vast wind was roaring. It circled and swept down upon me. It bore me away. I knew that I had no body, that indeed I had no form. Yet I *was*. A formless sentience whirling in that vast wind. It carried me into infinite distance. Bodyless, intangible as I knew myself to be, yet it poured into me an unearthly vitality. I roared with the wind in unhuman jubilance. The vast wind circled and raced me back from immeasurable space. . . .

I seemed to awaken, that pulse of strange jubilance still surging through

me. . . . Ah! There was what I must destroy . . . there on the bed . . . must kill so that this pulse of jubilance would not cease . . . must kill so that the vast wind would sweep me up again and away and feed me with its life. But careful . . . careful . . . there—there in the throat just under the ear . . . there is where I must plunge it . . . then off with the wind again . . . there where the pulse beats . . . *what is holding me back?* . . caution . . . caution . . . *"I am going to take his temperature"* . . . that's it, careful . . . *"I am going to take his temperature."* Now—one quick spring then into his throat where the pulse beats. . . . *"Not with that you don't!"* . . . Who said that? . . . Still holding me . . . rage, consuming and ruthless . . . blackness and the sound of a vast wind roaring away and away. . . .

I heard a voice: "Slap him again, Bill, but not so hard. He's coming around." I felt a stinging blow on my face. The dancing mists cleared from before my eyes. I was standing half-way between the nurse's table and Ricori's bed. The guard Jack held my arms pinioned to my sides. The guard Bill's hand was raised—it held a gun. There was something clenched in my own hand. I looked down. It was a strong scalpel, razor-edged!

I dropped the scalpel. I said, quietly: "It's all right now, you can release me."

The guard Bill said nothing. His comrade did not loosen his grip. I twisted my head and I saw that both their faces were sallow white. I said:

"It was what I had expected. It was why I instructed you. It is over. You can keep your guns on me if you like."

The guard who held me freed my arms. I touched my cheek gingerly.

"You must have hit me rather hard. Bill," I said mildly.

He said: "If you could 'a' seen your face, doc, you'd wonder I didn't smash it."

I nodded, clearly sensible now of the demoniac quality of that rage. I asked: "What did I do?"

The guard Bill said: "You wake up and set there for a minute staring at the chief. Then you take something out of that drawer and get up. You say you're going to take his temperature. You're half to him before we see what you got. I shout, 'Not with that you don't!' Jack grabs you. Then you went—crazy. And I had to slam you. That's all."

I nodded again. I took out of my pocket the knotted cord of woman's pale hair, held it over a dish and touched a match to it. It began to burn, writhing like a tiny snake as it did so, the complex knots untying as the flame touched them. I dropped the last inch of it upon the plate and watched it turn to ash.

"I think there'll be no more trouble tonight," I said. "But keep up your watch just as before."

I dropped back into the chair and closed my eyes.

Well, Braile had not shown me a soul. but—I believed in Mme. Mandilip.

CHAPTER XIII

A Doll Kills

THE balance of the night I slept soundly and dreamlessly. I awakened at my usual hour of seven. The guards were alert. I asked if anything had been heard from McCann, and they answered no. I wondered a little at that, but they did not seem to think it out of the ordinary. Their reliefs were soon due, and I cautioned them to speak to no one but McCann about the occurrences, reminding them that no one would be likely to believe them if they did. They assured me, earnestly, that they would be silent. I told them that I wanted the guards to remain within the room thereafter, as long as they were necessary.

Ricori was sleeping deeply and naturally. In all ways his condition was most satisfactory. I concluded that the second shock. as sometimes happens, had counteracted the lingering effects of

the initial one. When he awakened, he would be able to speak and move. I gave this news to the guards. I could see that they were bursting with questions. I gave them no encouragement.

At eight, my day nurse for Ricori appeared, plainly much surprised to have found Roberts sleeping and me taking her place. I made no explanation, simply telling her that the guards would now be stationed within the room instead of outside the door.

At eight thirty, Braile dropped in on me for breakfast, and to report. I let him finish before I apprised him of what had happened. I said nothing, however, of the nurse's little cap, nor of my own experience.

I assume this reticence for well considered reasons. One, Braile would accept in its entirety the appalling deduction from the cap's presence. I strongly suspected that he had been in love with Walters, and that I would be unable to restrain him from visiting the dollmaker. Usually hard-headed, he was in this matter far too suggestible.

It would be dangerous for him, and his observations would be worthless to me. Second, if he knew of my own experience, he would without doubt refuse to let me out of his sight. Third—either of these contingencies would defeat my own purpose, which was to interview Mme. Mandilip entirely alone—with the exception of McCann to keep watch outside the shop.

What would come of that meeting I could not forecast. But, obviously, it was the only way to retain my self respect.

To admit that what had just occurred was witchcraft, sorcery, supernatural—was to surrender to superstition. Nothing can be supernatural. If anything exists, it must exist in obedience to natural laws. Material bodies *must* obey material laws. We may not know those laws—but they exist nevertheless. If Mme. Mandilip possessed knowledge of an unknown science, it behooved me as an exemplar of a known science to find out what I could about the other. Especially as I had recently responded so thoroughly to it. That I had been able to outguess her in her technique—if it had been that, and not a self-induced illusion—gave me a pleasant feeling of confidence. At any rate, meet her I must.

It happened to be one of my days for consultation, so I could not get away until after one. I asked Braile to take charge of matters after that, for a few hours.

CLOSE to ten the nurse telephoned that Ricori was awake, that he was able to speak, and was asking for me.

He smiled at me as I entered the room. He said as I leaned over and took his wrist:

"I think you have saved more than my life, Dr. Lowell; Ricori thanks you. He will never forget!"

A bit florid, but thoroughly in character. It showed that his mind was functioning normally. I was relieved. "We'll have you up in a jiffy." I patted his hand.

He whispered: "Have there been any more—deaths?"

I had been wondering whether he had retained any recollection of the affair of the night. I answered:

"No. But you have lost much strength since McCann brought you here. I don't want you to do much talking today." I added casually: "No, nothing has happened. Oh, yes—you fell out of bed this morning. Do you remember?"

He glanced at the guards and then back at me. He said:

"I am weak. Very weak. You must make me strong quickly."

"We'll have you sitting up in two days, Ricori."

"In less than two days I must be up and out. There is a thing I must do. It cannot wait."

I did not want him to become excited. I abandoned any intention of asking what had happened in the car. I said, incisively:

"That will depend entirely upon you.

You must not excite yourself. You must do as I tell you. I am going to leave you now, to give orders for your nutrition. Also, I want your guards to remain in this room."

He said: "And still you tell me—nothing has happened?"

"I don't intend to *have* anything happen." I leaned over him and whispered: "McCann has guards around the Mandilip woman. She cannot run away."

He said: "But her servitors are more efficient than mine, Dr. Lowell!"

I looked at him sharply. His eyes were inscrutable. I went back to my office, deep in thought. What did Ricori know?

At eleven o'clock McCann called me on the telephone. I was so glad to hear from him that I was angry.

"Where on earth have you been—" I began.

"Listen, doc. I'm at Mollie's—Peters sister," he interrupted. "Come here, quick."

The peremptory demand added to my irritation.

"Now, now," I answered. "These are my office hours. I will not be free until one."

"Can't you break away? Something's happened. I don't know what to do!" There was desperation in his voice.

"*What* has happened?" I asked.

"I can't tell you over—" His voice steadied, grew gentle; I heard him say, "*Be quiet, Mollie. It can't do no good!*" Then to me—"Well, come as soon as you can, doc. I'll wait. Take the address." Then when he had given it to me, I heard him again speaking to another—"*Quit it, Mollie! I ain't going to leave you.*"

HE HUNG UP abruptly. I went back to my chair, troubled. He had not asked me about Ricori. That in itself was disquieting. Mollie? Peters' sister, of course! Was it that she had learned of her brother's death, and suffered collapse? I recalled that Ricori had said she was soon to be a mother. No, I felt that McCann's panic had been due to something more than that. I became more and more uneasy. I looked over my appointments. There were no important ones. Coming to a sudden determination, I told my secretary to call up and postpone them. I ordered my car, and set out for the address McCann had given me.

McCann met me at the door of the apartment. His face was drawn and his eyes haunted. He drew me within without a word, and led me through the hall. I passed an open door and glimpsed a woman with a sobbing child in her arms. McCann took me into a bedroom and pointed to the bed.

There was a man lying on it, covers pulled up to his chin. I went over to him, looked down upon him, touched him. The man was dead. He had been dead for hours. McCann said:

"Mollie's husband. Look him over like you done the boss."

I had a curiously unpleasant sense of being turned like a potter's wheel by some inexorable hand—from Peters, to Walters, to Ricori, to the body before me . . . would the wheel stop there?

I stripped the dead man. I took from my bag a magnifying glass and probes. I went over the body inch by inch, beginning at the region of the heart. Nothing there . . . nothing anywhere . . . I turned the body over—

At once, at the base of the skull, I saw a minute puncture!

I took a fine probe and inserted it. The probe—and again I had that feeling of infinite repetition—slipped into the puncture. I manipulated it, gently.

Something like a long thin needle had been thrust into that vital spot just where the spinal cord connects with the brain. By accident, or perhaps because the needle had been twisted savagely to tear the nerve paths, there had been paralysis of respiration and almost instant death.

I withdrew the probe and turned to McCann.

"This man has been murdered," I said.

"Killed by the same kind of weapon with which Ricori was attacked. But whoever did it made a better job. He'll never come to life again—as Ricori did."

"Yeah?" said McCann quietly. "An' me an' Paul was the only ones with Ricori when it happened. An' the only ones here with this man, doc, was his wife an' baby! Now what're you going to do about that? Say those two put him on the spot—like you thought we done the boss?"

I said: "What do you know about this, McCann? And how did you come to be here so—opportunely?"

He answered, patiently: "I wasn't here when he was killed—if that's what you're getting at. If you want to know the time, it was two o'clock. Mollie got me on the phone about an hour ago an' I come straight up."

"She had better luck than I had," I said dryly. "Ricori's people have been trying to get hold of you since one o'clock last night."

"I know. But I didn't know it till just before Mollie called me. I was on my way to see you. An' if you want to know what I was doing all night, I'll tell you I was out on the boss's business and yours. For one thing trying to find out where that hell-cat niece keeps her coupé. I found out—too late."

"But the men who were supposed to be watching—"

"Listen, doc, won't you talk to Mollie now?" he interrupted me. "I'm afraid for her. It's only what I told her about you an' that you was coming that's kept her up."

"Take me to her," I said, abruptly.

WE WENT into the room where I had seen the woman and the sobbing child. The woman was not more than twenty-seven or eight, I judged, and in ordinary circumstances would have been unusually attractive. Now her face was drawn and bloodless, in her eyes horror, and a fear on the very borderline of madness. She stared at me, vacantly; she kept rubbing her lips with the tips of her forefingers, staring at me with those eyes out of which looked a mind emptied of everything but fear and horror. The child, a girl of four, kept up her incessant sobbing. McCann shook the woman by the shoulder.

"Snap out of it, Mollie," he said, roughly, but pityingly, too. "Here's doc."

The woman became aware of me, suddenly, as though by a violent effort of will. She looked at me steadily for slow moments, then asked, less questioning than like one relinquishing a last thin thread of hope: "He is dead?"

She read the answer in my face. She cried:

"Oh, Johnnie—Johnnie! Dead!"

She took the child up in her arms. She said to it, almost tranquilly: "Johnnie Boy has gone away, darling. Daddy has had to go away. Don't cry, darling, we'll soon see him!"

I wished she would break down, weep; but that deep fear which never left her eyes was too strong; it blocked all normal outlets of sorrow. Not much longer, I realized, could her mind stand up under that tension.

"McCann," I whispered, "say something, do something that will arouse her. Make her violently angry, or make her cry. I don't care which."

He nodded. He snatched the child from her arms and thrust it behind him. He leaned, his face close to the woman's. He said, brutally:

"Come clean, Mollie! Why did you murder John?"

For a moment the woman stood, uncomprehending. Then a tremor shook her. The fear vanished from her eyes and fury took its place. She threw herself upon McCann, fists beating at his face. He caught her, pinioned her arms. The child screamed.

The woman's body relaxed, her arms fell to her sides. She crumpled to the floor, head bent over her knees. And tears came. McCann would have lifted, comforted her. I stopped him.

"Let her cry. It's the best thing for her."

And after a little while she looked up at McCann and said, shakily:

"You didn't mean that, Dan?"

He said: "No. I know you didn't do it, Mollie. But now you've got to talk to the doc. There's a lot to be done."

She asked, normally enough now: "Do you want to question me, doctor? Or shall I just go on and tell you what happened?"

McCann said: "Tell him the way you told me. Begin with the doll."

I said: "That's right. Tell your story. If I've any questions, I'll ask them when you are done."

SHE began: "Yesterday afternoon Dan here came and took me out for a ride. Usually John does not . . . did not . . get home until about six. But yesterday he was worried about me and came home early, around three. He likes . . he liked . . . Dan, and urged me to go. It was a little after six when I returned.

"'A present came for the kid while you were out, Mollie,' he said. 'It's another doll I'll bet Tom sent it.' Tom is my brother.

"There was a big box on the table, and I lifted the lid. In it was the most lifelike doll imaginable. A perfect thing. A little girl-doll. Not a baby-doll, but a doll like a child about ten or twelve years old. Dressed like a schoolgirl, with her books strapped and over her shoulder—only about a foot high, but perfect. The sweetest face—a face like a little angel!

"John said: 'It was addressed to you, Mollie, but I thought it was flowers and opened it. Looks as though it could talk, doesn't it? I'll bet it's what they call a portrait-doll.'

"At that, I was sure Tom had sent it. Because he had given little Mollie one doll before, and a friend of mine who's . . who's dead . . . gave her one from the same place, and she told me the woman who made the dolls had gotten her to pose for one. So putting this together, I thought Tom had gone and gotten little Mollie another. I asked John: 'Wasn't there a note or a card or anything in it?' He said, 'No—oh, yes, there was one funny thing. Where is it? I must have stuck it in my pocket.'

"He hunted around in his pockets and brought out a cord. It had knots in it, and it looked as if it was made of hair. I said, 'Wonder what Tom's idea was in that?' John put it back in his pocket, and I forgot it.

"Little Mollie was asleep. We put the doll beside her where she could see it when she woke up. When she did, she was in raptures over it. We had dinner and Mollie played with the doll. After we put her to bed I wanted to take it away from her, but she cried so we let her take it with her. We played cards until eleven, and then got ready for bed.

"Mollie is apt to be restless, and she still sleeps in a low crib—so she can't fall out. The crib is in our bedroom, in the corner beside one of the two windows. Between the two windows is my dressing table, and our bed is set with its head against the wall opposite the windows. We both stopped and looked at Mollie, as we always do . . . did. She was sound asleep with the doll clasped in one arm, its head on her shoulder.

"John said: 'Lord, Mollie—that doll looks alive as the baby! You wouldn't be surprised to see it get up and walk. Whoever posed for it was some sweet kid.'

"And that was true. It had the sweetest, gentlest little face . . . and, oh, Dr. Lowell . . . that's what helps make it so dreadful . . so utterly dreadful."

I saw the fear begin to creep back into her eyes

McCann said: "Buck up, Mollie!"

"I tried to take the doll. It was so lovely I was afraid the baby might roll on it or damage it some way," she went on quietly. "But she held it fast, and I did not want to awaken her. So I let it be. While we were undressing, John took the knotted cord out of his pocket.

"'That's a funny looking bunch of knots,' he said. 'When you hear from Tom ask him what it's for.' He tossed the cord on the little table at his side of the bed. It wasn't long before he was asleep. And then I went to sleep too—

"And then I woke up . . . or thought I did . . . for if I was awake or dreaming I don't know. It must have been a dream—and yet . . . or, God . . . John is dead . . . I heard him die . . ."

AGAIN, for a little time, the tears flowed. Then:

"If I was awake, it must have been the stillness that awakened me. And yet —it is what makes me feel I must have been dreaming. There couldn't be such silence . . . except in a dream. We are on the second floor, and always there is some sound from the street. There wasn't the least sound now . . . it was as though . . . as though the whole world had suddenly been stricken dumb. I thought I sat up, listening . . . listening *thirstily* for the *tiniest* of noises. I could not even hear John breathing. I was frightened, for there was something dreadful in that stillness. Something—living! Something—evil! I thought I tried to lean over to John, tried to touch him to awaken him.

"I could not move! I could not stir a finger! I tried to speak, to cry out. I could not!

"The window curtains were partly drawn. A faint light showed beneath and around them from the street. Suddenly this was blotted out. The room was dark —utterly dark.

"And then the green glow began—

"At first it was the dimmest gleam. It did not come from outside. It was in the room itself. It would flicker and dim, flicker and dim. But always after each dimming it was brighter. It was green-like the light of the firefly. Or like looking at moonlight through clear green water. At last the green glow became steady. It was like light, and still it wasn't light. It wasn't brilliant. It was just glowing. And it was everywhere—under the dressing table, under the chairs . . . I mean it cast no shadows. I could see everything in the bedroom. I could see the baby asleep in her crib, the doll's head on her shoulder . . .

"The doll moved!

"It turned its head, and seemed to listen to the baby's breathing. It put its little hands upon the baby's arm. The arm dropped away from it . . .

"The doll sat up!

"And now I was sure that I must be dreaming . . . the strange silence . . . the strange green glow . . . and this . . .

"The doll clambered over the side of the crib and dropped to the floor. It came skipping over the floor toward the bed like a child, swinging its school books by their strap. It turned its head from side to side as it came, looking around the room like a curious child. It caught sight of the dressing table, and stopped, looking up at the mirror. It climbed up the chair in front of the dressing table. It jumped from the chair seat to the table, tossed its books aside and began to admire itself in the mirror.

"It preened itself. It turned and looked at itself first over this shoulder and then over that. I thought: 'What a queer fantastic dream!' It thrust its face close to the mirror and rearranged and patted its hair. I thought: 'What a vain little doll! And then I thought: 'I'm dreaming all this because John said the doll was so lifelike he wouldn't be surprised to see it walk.' And then I thought: 'But I can't be dreaming or I wouldn't be trying to account for what I'm dreaming!' And then it all seemed so absurd that I laughed. I knew I had made no sound. I knew I couldn't. That the laugh was inside me. But it was as though the doll had heard me. It turned and looked straight at me—"

SHE shuddered, then went on: "My heart seemed to die within me. I've had nightmares, Dr. Lowell—but never in the worst of them did I feel as I did when the doll's eyes met mine . . .

"They were the eyes of a devil!

"They shone red. I mean they were—were luminous . . . like some animal's eyes in the dark. But it was the—the-*hellishness* in them that made me feel as though a hand had gripped my heart! Those eyes from hell in that face like one of God's own angels . . .

"I don't know how long it stood there, glaring at me with those devil's eyes. But at last it swung itself down and sat on the edge of the dressing table, legs swinging like a child's, and still with its eyes on mine. Then slowly, deliberately, it lifted its little arm and reached behind its neck. Just as slowly it brought its arm back. In its hand was a long pin . like a dagger.

"It dropped from the dressing table to the floor. It skipped toward me and was hidden by the bottom of the bed. An instant—and it had clambered up the bed and stood, still looking at me with those red eyes, at John's feet.

"I tried to cry out, tried to move, tried to arouse John. prayed—'Oh, God, wake him up! Dear God—wake him!'

"The doll 'ooked away from me. It stood there, looking at John. It began to creep along his body, up toward his head. I tried to move my head, to follow it. I could not. The doll passed out of my sight . . .

"I heard a dreadful, sobbing groan. I felt John shudder, then stretch and twist . . . I heard him sigh . . .

"Deep deep down . . I knew John was dying . . and I could do nothing . . in the silence . . . in the green glow . .

"I heard something like the note of a flute, in the street, beyond the windows. There was a tiny scurrying. I saw the doll skip across the floor and spring up to the window sill. It knelt there for a moment, looking out into the street. It held something in its hand. And then I saw that what it held was the knotted cord John had thrown on his table.

"I heard the flute note again. . .the doll swung itself out of the window. . .I had a glimpse of its red eyes. . .I saw its little hands clutching the sill. . .and it was gone. . .

"The green glow. . .blinked and. . . went out. The light from the street returned around the curtains. The silence seemed. . .seemed. . .to be *sucked* away.

"And then something like a wave of darkness swept over me. I went down under it. Before it swept over me I heard the clock strike two.

"When I awakened again. . .or came out of my faint. . .or, if it was just a dream, when I awakened. . .I turned to John. He lay there. . .so still! I touched him. He was cold. . .so cold!

"I knew he was dead!

"Dr. Lowell. . .tell me. . .what was dream and what was real? I know that no doll could have killed John!

"Did he reach out to me when he was dying, and did the dream come from that? Or did I. .dreaming. . .kill him?"

CHAPTER XIV

The Vanishing Act

THERE was an agony in her eyes that forbade the truth, or any part of it. So I lied to her.

"I can comfort you as to that, at least. Your husband died of entirely natural causes—from a blood clot in the brain. My examination satisfied me thoroughly. You had nothing to do with it. As for the doll—you had an unusually vivid dream, that is all."

She looked at me as one who would give her soul to believe. She said:

"But I heard him die!"

"It is quite possible—" I plunged into a somewhat technical explanation—even if she did not quite understand it, it would sound important and therefore, perhaps, convincing. "You may have been half-awake—on what we term the borderline of waking consciousness. In all probability the entire dream was suggested by what you heard.

"Your subconsciousness tried to ex-

Desperately, like a frightened child, the girl whispered, "The witch is searching for me . . . her eyes are looking for me . . . she sees me! Hide me!"

plain the sounds, and conceived the whole fantastic drama you have recited to me. What seemed, in your dream to take up many minutes actually passed through your mind in a split second—the subconsciousness makes its own time. It is a common experience. A door slams, or there is some other abrupt and violent sound. It awakens the sleeper. When he is fully awake he has recollections of some singularly vivid dream which ended with a loud noise. In reality, his dream began with the noise. The dream may have seemed to him to have taken hours. It was in fact, almost instantaneous, taking place in the brief moment between noise and awakening."

She drew a deep breath; her eyes lost some of their agony. I pressed my advantage.

"And there is another thing you must remember — your condition. It makes many women peculiarly subject to realistic dreams, usually of an unpleasant character."

She whispered: "That is true. When little Mollie was coming I had the most dreadful dreams—"

She hesitated; I saw doubt again cloud her face.

"But the doll—the doll is gone!" she said.

I cursed myself at that; caught unawares and with no ready answer. But McCann had one. He said, easily:

"Sure it's gone, Mollie. I dropped it down the chute into the waste. After what you told me I thought you'd better not see it any more."

She asked, sharply.

"Where did you find it? I looked for it."

"Guess you weren't in shape to do much looking," he answered. "I found

it down at the foot of the crib, all messed up in the covers. It was busted. Looked like the kid had been dancing on it in her sleep."

She said, hesitantly: "It might have slipped down. I don't think I looked there—"

I said, severely, so she might not suspect collusion between McCann and myself:

"You ought not to have done that, McCann. If you had shown it, Mrs. Gilmore would have known at once that she had been dreaming and would have been spared much pain."

"Well, I ain't a doctor." His voice was sullen. "I done what I thought best."

"Go down and see if you find it," I ordered, tartly. He g l a n c e d at me sharply. I nodded—and hoped he understood. In a few minutes he returned.

"They cleaned out the waste only fifteen minutes ago," he reported, lugubriously. "The doll went with it. I found this, though."

He held up a little strap from which dangled a half-dozen miniature books. He asked:

"Was them what you dreamed the doll dropped on the dressing table, Mollie?"

She stared at it, and shrank away.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please put it away, Dan. I don't want to see it."

He looked at me triumphantly.

"I guess maybe I was right at that when I threw the doll away, doc."

I said: "At any rate now that Mrs. Gilmore is satisfied it was all a dream, there's no harm done."

"And now," I took her cold hands in mine, "I'm going to prescribe for you. I don't want you to stay in this place a moment longer than you can help. I want you to pack a bag with whatever you and little Mollie may need for a week or so, and leave at once. I am thinking of your condition—and a little life that is on its way. I will attend to all the necessary formalities, and you can instruct McCann as to—the other details. But I want you to go. Will you do this?"

TO MY relief, she assented readily. There was a somewhat harrowing moment when she and the child bade farewell to the body. But before many minutes she was on her way with McCann to relatives. The child had wanted to take the "boy and girl dolls." I had refused to allow this, even at the risk of again arousing the mother's suspicions. I wanted nothing of Mme. Mandilip to accompany them to their refuge. McCann supported me, and the dolls were left behind.

I called an undertaker I know. I made a last examination of the body. The minute puncture would not be noticed, I was sure. There was no danger of an autopsy, since my certification of the cause of death would not be questioned. When the undertaker arrived I explained the absence of the wife—imminent maternity, and departure at my order. I set down the cause of death as thrombosis—rather grimly I recalled the similar diagnosis of the banker's physician, and what I had thought of it.

When the body had been taken away, and while I sat waiting for McCann to return, I tried to orient myself to this phantasmagoria t h r o u g h which, it seemed to me, I had been moving for endless time. I tried to divest my mind of all prejudice, all preconceived ideas of what could and could not be. I began by conceding that this Mme. Mandilip could possess some strange wisdom of which modern science is ignorant.

I refused to call it witchcraft or sorcery; the words mean nothing, since they have been applied through the ages to entirely natural phenomena whose causes were not understood. Not so long ago, for example, the lighting of a match was witchcraft to many savage tribes. No, Mme. Mandilip was no "witch," as Ricori thought her. She was mistress of some unknown science—that was all.

And being a science, it must be governed by fixed laws—unknown though those laws might be to me. If the dollmaker's activities defied the laws of cause and effect as I conceived them—

still they must conform to laws of cause and effect of their own. There was nothing supernatural about them—it was only that like the South Sea Islander, I did not know what made her matches burn.

Something of these laws, something of the woman's technique—using the word as signifying the details, collectively considered, of mechanical performance in any part—I thought I perceived. The knotted cord, the "witch's ladder," apparently was an essential in the animation of the dolls. One had been slipped into Ricori's pocket before the first attack upon him. I had found another beside his bed after the disturbing occurrences of the night. I had gone to sleep holding one of the cords—and had tried to murder my patient! A third cord had accompanied the doll that had killed Gilmore.

Clearly the cord was a part of the formula for the direction or control of the dolls. Against this, was the fact that the intoxicated stroller could not have been carrying one of the "ladders" when attacked by the Peters doll. It might be, however, that the cord had only to do with the initial activity of the puppets; that once activated, their action might continue for an indefinite period.

There was evidence of a fixed formula in the making of the dolls. First, it seemed, the prospective victim's free consent to serve as model must be obtained; second, a wound which gave the opportunity to apply the salve which caused the unknown death; third, the doll must be a faithful replica of the victim. That the agency of death was the same in each case was proven by the similar symptoms. But did those deaths actually have anything to do with the motility of the dolls? Were they actually a necessary part of the operation? The dollmaker might believe so; indeed, undoubtedly did believe so. I did not.

That the doll which had stabbed Ricori had been made in the semblance of Peters, that the "nurse doll" which the guards had seen poised on my window ledge might have been the one for which Walters had posed, that the doll which had thrust the pin into Gilmore's brain was, perhaps, the replica of little Anita, the thirteen-year-old school-girl—all this I admitted.

But that anything of Peters, anything of Walters, anything of Anita, had animated these dolls . . . that dying, something of their vitality, their minds, their "souls" had been drawn from them, had been transmuted into an essence of evil and imprisoned in these wire-skeletoned puppets . . . against this all my reason revolted. I could not force my mind to accept the possibility.

MY ANALYSIS was interrupted by the return of McCann.

He said, laconically: "Well, we put it over."

I asked: "McCann—you weren't by any chance telling the truth when you said you found the doll?"

"No, doc. The doll was gone all right."

"But where did you get the little books?"

"Just where Mollie said the doll tossed 'em—on her dressing table. I snaked 'em after she'd told me her story. She hadn't noticed 'em. I had a hunch. It was a good one, wasn't it?"

"You had me wondering," I replied. "I don't know what we could have said if she had asked for the knotted cord."

"The cord didn't seem to make much of a dent on her—" he hesitated. "But I think it means a whole lot, doc. I think if I hadn't took her out, and John hadn't happened home, and she'd opened the box instead of him—I think it's Mollie he'd have found lying dead beside him."

"You mean—"

"I mean the dolls go for whoever gets the cords," he said, somberly.

Well, it was much the same thought I had in my own mind.

I asked: "But why should anybody want to kill—Mollie?"

"Maybe somebody thinks she knows too much. And that brings me to what

I've been wanting to tell you. The Mandilip hag knows she's being watched!"

"Well, her watchers are better than ours," I echoed Ricori. I told him then of the second attack in the night, and why I had sought him. He listened without interruption.

"An' that," he said when I had ended, "proves the hag knows who's behind the watch on her. She tried to wipe out both the boss and Mollie. She's onto us, doc."

"The dolls are accompanied," I said. "The musical note is a summons. They do not disappear into thin air. They answer the note and make their way—somehow—to whomsoever sounds the note. The dolls must be taken from the shop, therefore one of the two women must take them. How?"

"I don't know." His lean face was worried. "It's the fish-white gal does it. Let me tell you what I found out, doc. After I leave you last night I go down to see what the boys have to say. I hear plenty. They say about four o'clock the wench goes in the back an' the old woman takes a chair in the store. They don't think nothing of that. But about seven who do they see walking down the street and into the doll joint but the wench? They give the boys in back hell, but they ain't seen her go, an' they pass the buck to the boys in front.

"Then, about eleven o'clock, one of the relief lads comes in with worse news. He says he's down at the foot of Broadway when a coupé turns the corner an' driving it is the gal. He can't be mistaken because he's seen her in the doll joint. She goes up Broadway at a good clip. He sees there ain't nobody trailing her and he looks around for a taxi. Course there's nothing in sight—not even a parked car he can lift. So he comes down to the gang to ask what the devil they mean by it. An' again nobody's seen the gal go.

"I take a couple of the boys an' we start out to comb the neighborhood to find out where she stables the coupé. We don't have no luck at all until about four o'clock when one of the tails—one of the lads who's been looking—meets up with me. He says about three he sees the gal—at least he thinks it's her—walking along the street round the corner from the joint. She's got a coupla big suitcases, but they don't seem to trouble her none. She's walking quick. But *away* from the doll joint.

"He eases over to get a better look when all of a sudden she ain't there. He sniffs around the place he's seen her. There ain't hide-nor-hair of her. It's pretty dark, an' he tries the doors an' the areaways, but the doors are locked an' there ain't nobody in the areaways. So he gives it up an' hunts me.

"I look over the place. It's about a third of the way down the block around the corner from the doll joint The doll joint is eight numbers from the corner They're mostly shops an' I guess storage up above. Not many people living there. The houses are all old ones. Still I don't see how the gal can get to the doll joint. I think maybe the tail's mistaken. He's seen somebody else, or just thinks he's seen somebody. But we scout close around, an' after a while we see a place that looks like it might stable a car. It don't take us long to open the doors, an' sure enough, there's a coupé with its engine still hot. It ain't been in long. Also it's the same kind of coupé the lad who's seen the gal says she was driving.

"I lock the place up again, an' go back to the boys. I watch with 'em the rest of the night. Not a light in the joint. But nigh eight o'clock, the wench shows up inside the shop an' opens up!"

"But still," I said at this point, "you have no real evidence she had been out The girl your man thought he saw might not have been the right one at all."

HE LOOKED at me pityingly.

"She got out in the afternoon without 'em seeing her, didn't she? What's to keep her from doing the same thing at night? The lad saw her driving a coupé, didn't he? An' we find a coupé

like it close where the wench dropped out of sight."

I sat thinking. There was no reason to disbelieve McCann. And there was a sinister coincidence in the hours the girl had been seen. I said, half-aloud:

"The time she was out in the afternoon coincides with the time of the attack upon Ricori and the death of Gilmore."

"You hit it plumb in the eye!" said McCann. "She goes an' leaves the doll at Mollie's, an' comes back. She goes an' sets the dolls on the boss, waits for 'em to pop out, then goes an' collects the one she's left at Mollie's. Then she beats it back. They're in the suitcases she's carrying. She's taking them home."

I could not hold back the irritation of helpless mystification that swept me.

"And I suppose you think she got out of the house by riding a broomstick up the chimney," I said sarcastically.

"No," he answered, seriously. "Them houses are old and I think maybe there's a rat-hole of a passage or something she gets through. Anyway, they're watching the street an' the coupé stable now, an' she can't pull that again." He added, morosely: "At that, I ain't saying she couldn't bit a broomstick if she had to."

I said, abruptly: "McCann, I'm going down to talk to this Mme. Mandilip. I want you to come with me."

He said: "I'll be right beside you, doc. Fingers on my guns."

I said: "No. I'm going to see her by myself. But I want you to keep close watch outside."

He did not like that; argued; at last reluctantly assented.

I called up my office, talked to Braile and learned that Ricori was recovering with astonishing rapidity. I asked Braile to look after things the balance of the day, inventing a consultation to account for the request. I had myself switched to Ricori's room. I had the nurse tell him that McCann was with me, that we were making an investigation along a certain line, the results of which I would inform him on my return; and that unless Ricori objected I wanted McCann to stay with me the balance of the afternoon, and Ricori sent back word that McCann must follow my orders as though they were his own, and that I could keep him as long as I desired. Ricori wanted to speak to me, but that I did not want, and pleading urgent haste rang off.

I ate an excellent and hearty lunch. I felt that it would help me hold tighter to the realities—or what I thought realities—when I met this murderous mistress of illusions. McCann was oddly silent and preoccupied.

The clock was striking three when I set off to meet Mme. Mandilip.

CHAPTER XV

MME. MANDILIP

I STOOD at the window of the dollmaker's shop, mastering a stubborn revulsion against entering. I knew McCann was on guard. I knew that Ricori's men were watching from the houses opposite; that others moved among the passers-by. Despite the roaring clatter of the elevated trains, the bustle of traffic along the Battery, the outwardly normal life of the street, the dollmaker's shop was a beleagured fortress.

There were only a few dolls displayed in the window, but they were unusual enough to catch the eyes of a child or a grownup. Not so beautiful as that which had been given Walters, nor those two I had seen at the Gilmores', but admirable lures, nevertheless. The light inside the shop was subdued. I could see a slender girl moving at a counter. The niece of Mme. Mandilip, no doubt. Certainly the size of the shop did not promise any such noble chamber behind it as Walters had painted in her diary. Still, the houses were old, and the back might extend beyond the limits of the shop itself—

Abruptly and impatiently I ceased to temporize. I opened the door and walked in.

The girl turned as I entered. She watched me as I went toward the counter. She did not speak. I studied her, swiftly, as I approached. A hysterical type, obviously; one of the most perfect I had ever seen. I took note of the prominent pale blue eyes with their vague gaze and distended pupils; the long and slender neck and slightly rounded features; the pallor and the long thin fingers. Her hands were clasped, and I could see that these were unusually flexible—thus carrying out to the last jot the Laignel-Lavastine syndrome of the hysteric. In another time and other circumstances she would have been a priestess, voicing oracles; or a saint.

Fear was her handmaiden. There could be no doubt of that. And yet I was sure it was not of me she was frightened. Rather was it some deep and alien fear which lay coiled at the roots of her being, sapping her vitality—a spiritual fear. I looked at her hair. It was a silvery ash . . . the color . . . the color of the hair that formed the knotted cords!

As she saw me staring at her hair, the vagueness in her pale eyes diminished; was replaced by alertness. For the first time she seemed to be really aware of me. I said, with the utmost casualness:

"I was attracted by the dolls in your window. I have a little granddaughter who would like one, I think."

"The dolls are for sale. If there is one you fancy, you may buy it."

Her voice was low-pitched, almost whispering, indifferent. But I thought the intentness in her eyes sharpened.

"I suppose," I answered, feigning something of sarcasm, "that is what any chance customer may do. But it happens that this child is a favorite of mine and for her I want the best. Would it be too much trouble to show me what other, and perhaps better, dolls you may have?"

HER eyes wavered from me for a moment. I had the thought that she was listening to some sound which I could not hear. Abruptly her manner lost its indifference, became gracious. And at that exact moment I felt other eyes upon me; studying me, searching me. So strong was the impression that, involuntarily, I turned and peered about the shop. There was no one there except the girl and myself. A door was at the counter's end, but it was tightly closed. I shot a glance at the window to see whether McCann was staring in. No one was there.

Then, like the clicking of a camera shutter, the unseen gaze was gone. I turned back to the girl. She had spread a half-dozen boxes on the counter and was opening them. She looked up at me, candidly—almost sweetly.

"Why, of course you may see all that we have. I am sorry if you thought me indifferent to your desires. My aunt, who makes the dolls, loves children. She would not willingly allow one who also loves them to go from here disappointed."

It was a curious little speech, oddly stilted; enunciated half as though she were reciting from dictation. Yet it was not that which aroused my interest so much as the subtle change that had taken place in the girl herself. Her voice was no longer languid. It held a vital vibrant quality. Nor was she the lifeless, listless person she had been.

The door beside the counter opened. Mme. Mandilip stood there.

Prepared though I had been for the extraordinary by Walters' description of the dollmaker, her appearance gave me a distinct shock. Her height, her massiveness, were amplified by the proximity of the dolls and the slender figure of the girl. It was a giantess who looked upon me from the doorway—a giantess whose heavy face with its broad, high cheekbones, haired upper lip and thick mouth produced a suggestion of masculinity grotesquely in contrast with the immense bosom.

I looked into her eyes and forgot all grotesqueness of face and figure. The eyes were enormous, a luminous black,

clear, disconcertingly alive. As though they were twin spirits of life and independent of the body. And from them poured a flood of vitality that sent along my nerves a warm tingle in which there was nothing sinister—or was not then.

With difficulty I forced my own gaze from those eyes. I looked for her hands. She was swathed in black, and her hands were hidden in the folds of her ample dress. My gaze went back to her eyes and within them was a sparkle of the mocking contempt I had seen in those of the girl. She spoke.

"What my niece has shown does not please you?"

I gathered my wits. I said: "They are all beautiful, Mme.—Mme.—"

"Mandilip," she said, serenely. "Mme. Mandilip. You do not know the name, eh?"

"It is my ill fortune," I answered, ambiguously. "I have a grandchild—a little girl. I want something peculiarly fine for her seventh birthday. All that I have been shown are beautiful—but I was wondering whether there was not something—"

"Something—*peculiarly*—" her voice lingered on the word—"more beautiful. Well, perhaps there is. But when I favor customers *peculiarly*—" I now was sure she emphasized the word—"I like to know with whom I am dealing. You think me a strange shopkeeper, do you not?"

She laughed and I marveled at the freshness, the youthfulness, the curious tinkling sweetness of that laughter.

It was by a distinct effort that I brought myself back to reality, put myself again on guard. I drew a card from my case. I did not wish her to recognize me, as she would have had I given her my own card nor did I desire to direct her attention to any one she could harm. I had, therefore, prepared myself by carrying the card of a doctor friend long dead. She glanced at it.

"Ah," she said. "You are a professional man—a physician. Well, now that we know each other, come with me and I will show you of my best."

She led me through the door and into a wide, dim corridor. She touched my arm and again I felt that strange, vital tingling. She paused at another door, and faced me.

"It is here," she said, "that I keep my best. My—*peculiarly*—best!" Once more she laughed, then flung the door open.

I crossed the threshold and paused, looking about the room with swift disquietude. For here was no spacious chamber of enchantment such as Nurse Walters had described. True enough, it was somewhat larger than one would have expected. But where were the exquisite old panelings, the ancient tapestries, that magic mirror which was like a great "half-globe of purest water," and all those other things that had made it seem to her a Paradise?

The light came through the half-drawn curtains of a window opening upon a small inclosed and barren yard. The walls and ceiling were of plain, stained wood. One end was entirely taken up by small, built-in cabinets with wooden doors. There was a mirror on the wall, and it was round—but there any similarity to Walters's description ended. There was a fireplace, the kind one can find in any ordinary old New York house. On the walls were a few prints. The great table, the "baronial board," was an entirely commonplace one, littered with dolls' clothing in various stages of completion.

My disquietude grew. If Walters had been romancing about this room, then what else in her diary was invention—or, at least, as I had surmised when I had read it, the product of a too active imagination?

And yet—she had not been romancing about the dollmaker's eyes, nor her voice, and she had not exaggerated her appearance nor the peculiarities of the niece. The dollmaker's voice recalled me to myself, broke my thoughts.

"My room interests you?"

She spoke softly, and with, I thought, a certain secret amusement.

I said: "Any room where any true artist creates is of interest. And you are a true artist, Mme. Mandilip."

"And how do you know that?" she mused.

It had been a slip. I said, quickly:

"I am a lover of art. I have seen a few of your dolls. It does not take a gallery of his pictures to make one realize that Raphael, for example, was a master. One picture is enough."

She smiled, in the friendliest fashion. She closed the door behind me and pointed to a chair beside the table.

"You will not mind waiting a few minutes before I show you my dolls? There is a dress I must finish. It is promised, and soon the little one to whom I have promised it will come. It will not take me long."

"Why, no," I answered, and dropped into the chair.

She said, softly: "It is quiet here. And you seem weary. You have been working hard, eh? And you are *weary*."

I sank back into the chair. Suddenly I realized how weary I really was. For a moment my guard relaxed and I closed my eyes. I opened them to find that the dollmaker had taken her seat at the table.

AND now I saw her hands. They were long and delicate and white and I knew that they were the most beautiful I had ever beheld. And just as her eyes seemed to have life of their own, so did those hands seem living things; having a being independent of the body to which they belonged. She rested them on the table. She spoke again, caressingly:

"It is well to come now and then to a quiet place. Where peace is. One grows so weary—so *weary*. So tired, so very *tired*."

She picked a little dress from the table and began to sew. The long white fingers plied the needle while the other hand turned and moved the small garment. How wonderful was the motion of those long white hands—like a rhythm, like a song! Restful! She said, in low sweet tones:

"Ah, yes—here nothing of the outer world comes. All is peace—and rest—rest—"

I drew my eyes reluctantly from the slow dance of those hands; the weaving of those long and delicate fingers which moved so rhythmically. So restfully. The dollmaker's eyes were on me, softly, gently. They were full of that peace of which she had been telling. It would do no harm to relax a little, gain strength for the struggle which must come. And I was tired. I had not realized how tired! My gaze went back to her hands. Strange hands—no more belonging to that huge body than did the eyes and the voice.

Perhaps they did not! Perhaps that gross body was but a cloak, a covering, of the real body to which eyes and hands and voice belonged. I thought over that, watching the slow rhythm of the hands. What could the body be like to which they belonged? As beautiful as hands and eyes and voice?

She was humming some strange air. It was a slumberous, lulling melody. It crept along my tired nerves, into my weary mind—distilling sleep , . . sleep. As the hands were weaving sleep. As the eyes were pouring sleep upon me—

Sleep!

Something within me was raging, furiously. Bidding me rouse myself. Shake off this lethargy—

The dollmaker was hypnotizing me!

By the tearing effort that brought me gasping to the surface of consciousness, I knew that I must have passed far along the path of that strange sleep. And for an instant, on the threshold of complete awakening, I saw the room as Walters had seen it.

Vast, filled with mellow light; the ancient tapestries, the panelings, the carved screens behind which hidden shapes lurked laughing—laughing at me.

Upon the wall the mirror—and it was like a great half-globe of purest water within which the images of the carvings round its frame swayed like the reflections of verdure round a clear woodland pool!

The immense chamber s e e m e d to waver, shake—and was gone.

I STOOD beside an overturned chair in that room to which the dollmaker had led me. And the dollmaker was beside me, close. She was regarding me with a curious puzzlement and, I thought, a shadow of chagrin. It flashed upon me that she was like one who had been unexpectedly interrupted—

Interrupted! When had she left her chair? How long had I slept? What had she done to me while I had been sleeping? What had that terrific effort of will by which I had broken from her web prevented her from doing?

I tried to speak—and could not. I stood tongue-tied, furious, humiliated. I realized that I had been trapped like the veriest tyro—I who should have been all alert, suspicious of every move. Trapped by voice and eyes and weaving hands . . .by the reiterated suggestion that I was weary. . .that here was peace. . . and sleep. . .sleep. . .

What had she done to me while I slept? Why could I not move? It was as though all my energy had been dissipated in that one tremendous thrust out of her web of sleep. I stood motionless, silent, spent. Not a muscle moved at command of my will. The enfeebled hands of my will reached out to them—and fell.

The dollmaker laughed. She walked to the cabinets on the far wall. My eyes followed her, helplessly. There was no slightest loosening of the paralysis that gripped me. She pressed a spring, and the door of a cabinet slipped down.

Within the cabinet was a child-doll. A little girl, sweet faced and smiling. I looked at it and felt a numbness at my heart. In its small, clasped hands was one of the dagger-pins, and I knew that this was the doll which had stirred in the arms of the Gilmore baby. . .had climbed from the baby's crib. . .had danced to the bed and thrust.

"This is one of my *peculiarly* best!" The dollmaker's eyes were on me and filled with cruel mockery. "A good doll! A bit careless at times, perhaps. Forgetting to bring back her schoolbooks when she goes visiting. But so obedient! Would you like her—for your granddaughter?"

Again she laughed—youthful, tingling, evil laughter. And suddenly I knew Ricori had been right and that this woman must be killed. I summoned all my will to leap upon her. I could not move a finger.

The long white hands groped over the next cabinet and touched its hidden spring. The numbness at my heart became the pressure of a hand on ice. Staring out at me from that cabinet was Walters—

And she was crucified!

So perfect, so—*alive* was the doll that it was like seeing the girl herself through a diminishing glass. I could not think of it as a doll, but as the girl. She was dressed in her nurse's uniform. She had no cap, and her b l a c k hair hung disheveled about her face. Her arms were outstretched, and through each palm a small nail had been thrust, pinning the hands to the back of the cabinet. The feet were bare, resting one on the other, and through the insteps had been thrust another nail. Completing the blasphemous, suggestion, above her head was a small placard. I read it:

"The Burned Martyr."

The dollmaker murmured—in a voice like honey garnered from flowers in hell:

"This doll has not behaved well. She has been disobedient. I punish my dolls when they do not behave well. But I see that you are distressed. Well, she has been punished enough—for the moment."

The long white hands crept into the cabinet, drew out the nails from hands and feet. She set the doll upright, lean-

ing against the back. She turned to me.

"You would like her for your granddaughter, perhaps? Alas! She is not for sale. She has lessons to learn before she goes again from me."

HER voice changed, lost its diabolic sweetness, became charged with menace.

"Now listen to me—Dr. Lowell! What—you did not think I knew you? I knew you from the first. You too need a lesson!" Her eyes blazed upon me. "You shall have your lesson—you fool! You who pretend to heal the mind—and know nothing, *nothing* I say, of what the mind is. You, who conceive the mind as but a part of a machine of flesh and blood, nerve and bone—and know nothing of what it houses. You—who admit existence of nothing unless you can measure it in your test tubes or see it under your microscope. Who define life as a chemical ferment and consciousness as the product of cells. You fool!

"Yet you and this savage Ricori, have dared to try to hamper me, to interfere with me, to hem me around with spies! Dared to threaten me—*Me*—possessor of the ancient wisdom beside which your science is a crackling of thorns under an empty pot! You fools! I know who are the dwellers in the mind—and the powers that manifest themselves through it—and those who dwell beyond it. They come at my call. And you think to pit your paltry knowledge against mine! You fool! Have you understood me? Speak!"

She pointed a finger at me. I felt my throat relax, knew I could speak once more.

"You hell hag!" I croaked. "You cursed murderess! You'll burn in the electric chair before I'm through with you!"

She came toward me, laughing.

"You would give me to the law? But who would believe you? None! The ignorance that your science has fostered is my shield. The darkness of your unbelief is my impregnable fortress. Go play with your machines, fool! Play with your machines! But meddle with me no more!"

Her voice grew quiet, deadly.

"Now this I tell you. If you would live, if you would have those live who are dear to you—take your spies away. Ricori you cannot save. He is mine. But you—think never of me again. Pry no more into my affairs. I do not fear your spies—but they offend me. Take them away. At once. If by nightfall they are still on watch—"

She caught me by the shoulder with a grip that bruised. She pushed me toward the door.

"Go!"

I fought to muster my will, to raise my arms. Could I have done so I would have struck her down as I would a ravening beast. I could not move them. Like an automaton I walked across the room to the door. The dollmaker opened it.

There was an odd rustling noise from the cabinets. Stiffly, I turned my head.

The doll of Walters had fallen forward. It lay half over the edge. Its arms swung, as though imploring me to take it away. I could see in its palms the marks of the crucifying nails. Its eyes were fixed on mine—

"Go!" said the dollmaker. "And remember!"

With the same stiff motion I walked through the corridor and into the shop. The girl watched me, with vague, fear filled eyes. As though a hand were behind me, pressing me inexorably on, I passed through the shop and out of its door, into the street.

I seemed to hear, did hear, the mocking evil-sweet laughter of the dollmaker!

CHAPTER XVI

THE DOLLMAKER STRIKES

THE moment I was out in the street volition, power of movement, returned to me. In an abrupt rush of rage, I turned to reenter the shop. A foot from it I was brought up against an invisible

wall. I could not advance a step; could not even raise my hands to touch the door. It was as though at that point my will refused to function, or rather that my legs and arms refused to obey my will. I realized what it was—post-hypnotic suggestion of an extraordinary kind; part of the same phenomenon which had held me motionless before the dollmaker, and had sent me like a robot out of her lair. I saw McCann coming toward me, and for an instant had the mad idea of ordering him to enter and end Mme. Mandilip with a bullet. Common sense swiftly told me that we could give no rational reason for such a killing, and that we would probably expiate it within the same apparatus of execution with which I had threatened her.

McCann said: "I was getting worried, doc. Just about to break in on you."

I said: "Come on, McCann. I want to get home as quickly as possible."

He looked at my face, and whistled.

"You look like you have been through a battle, doc."

I answered: "I have. And the honors are all with Mme. Mandilip—so far."

"You came out quiet enough. Not like the boss, with the hag spitting hell in his face. What happened?"

"I'll tell you later. Just let me be quiet for a while. I want to think."

What I actually wanted was to get back my self-possession. My mind seemed half blind, groping for the tangible. It was as if it had been enmeshed in cobwebs of a peculiarly unpleasant character, and although I had torn loose, fragments of the webs were still clinging to it. We got into the car and rolled on for some minutes in silence. Then McCann's curiosity got the better of him.

"Anyway," he asked, "what did you think of her?"

By this time I had come to a determination. Never had I felt anything to approach the loathing, the cold hatred, the implacable urge to kill, which this woman had aroused in me. It was not that my pride had suffered, although that was sore enough. No, it was the conviction that in the room behind the doll shop dwelt blackest evil. Evil as inhuman and alien as though the dollmaker had in truth come straight from that Hell in which Ricori believed.

There could be no compromise with that evil. Nor with the woman in whom it was centered.

I said: "McCann, in all the world there is nothing so evil as that woman. Do not let the girl slip through your fingers again. Do you think she knew last night that she was seen?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Increase the guards in front and back of the place at once. Do it openly, so that the women cannot help noticing it. They will think, unless the girl is aware that she is observed, that we are still in ignorance of the other exit. They will think we believe she managed to slip out unseen either at front or back. Have a car in readiness at each end of the street where she keeps the sedan. Be careful not to arouse their suspicions. If the girl appears, follow her—" I hesitated.

McCann asked: "And then what?"

"I want her taken – abducted, kidnapped—whatever you choose to call it. It must be done with the utmost quietness. I leave that to you. You know how such things are done better than I. Do it quickly and do it quietly. But not too near the doll shop—as far away from it as you can. Gag the girl, tie her up if necessary. But get her. Then search the car thoroughly. Bring the girl to me at my house—with whatever you find. Do you understand?"

He said: "If she shows, we'll get her. You going to put her through the third degree?"

"That—and something more. I want to see what the dollmaker will do. It may goad her into some action which will enable us to lay hands on her legitimately. Bring her within reach of the

law. She may or may not have other invisible servants, but my intention is to deprive her of the visible one. It may make the others visible. At the least, it will cripple her."

He looked at me curiously. "She must 'a' hit you pretty hard, doc."

"She did," I answered curtly.

He hesitated. "You going to tell the boss about this?" he asked at last.

"I may or I may not—tonight. It depends upon his condition. Why?"

"Well, if we're going to pull off anything like a kidnapping, I think he ought to know."

I said: "McCann, I told you Ricori's message was that you were to obey orders from me as though they were from him. I have given you your orders. I accept all the responsibility."

"Okay," he answered, but I could see that his doubt still lingered.

Now, assuming Ricori had sufficiently recovered, there was no real reason why I should not tell him what had happened during my encounter with Mme. Mandilip. It was different with Braile. More than suspecting, as I did, the attachment between him and Walters, I could not tell him of the crucified doll—and even now I thought of it not as a doll crucified, but as Walters crucified. If I told him, I knew well that there would be no holding him back from instant attack upon the dollmaker. I did not want that.

But I was aware of a most stubborn reluctance to tell Ricori the details of my visit. The same held good for Braile in other matters beside the Walters doll. And why did I feel the same way about McCann? I set it down to wounded vanity.

WE STOPPED in front of my house. It was then close to six. Before getting out of the car I repeated my instructions.

McCann nodded. "Okay, doc. If she comes out, we get her."

I went into the house, and found a note from Braile saying that he would not be in to see me until after dinner. I was glad of that. I dreaded the ordeal of his questions. I learned that Ricori was asleep, and that he had been regaining strength with astonishing rapidity.

I instructed the nurse to tell him, should he awaken, that I would visit him after I had dined. I lay down, endeavoring to snatch a little sleep before eating.

I could not sleep—constantly the face of the dollmaker came before me whenever I began to relax into a doze, throwing me into intense wakefulness.

At seven I arose and ate a full and excellent dinner, deliberately drinking at least twice the amount of wine I ordinarily permit myself, and finishing with strong coffee. When I arose from the table I felt distinctly better; mentally alert and master of myself once more—or so I believed. I had decided to apprise Ricori of my instructions to McCann concerning the abduction of the girl. I realized that this was certain to bring down upon me a minute catechism concerning my visit to the doll shop, but I had formulated the story I intended to tell—

It was with a distinct shock that I realized that this story was all that I *could* tell. Realized that I could not communicate to the others the portions I had deleted, even if I desired. And that this was by command of the dollmaker—post-hypnotic suggestion that was a part of those other inhibitions she had laid upon my will; those same inhibitions which had held me powerless before her, had marched me out of her shop like a robot and thrust me back from her door when I would have reentered!

During that brief tranced sleep she had said to me: "This and this you must not tell. This and this you may."

I could not speak of the child-doll with the angelic face and the dagger-pin which had pricked the bubble of Gil-

more's life. I could not speak of the Walters doll and its crucifixion. I could not speak of the dollmaker's tacit admission that she had been responsible for the deaths that had first led us to her.

However, this realization made me feel even better. Here at last was something understandable—the tangibility for which I had been groping; something entirely in the realm of my own science. I had done the same thing to patients, many times; bringing their minds back to normality by these same post-hypnotic suggestions.

Also, there was a way by which I could wash my own mind clean of the dollmaker's suggestions if I chose to do so. Should I do this? Stubbornly I decided I would not. It would be admission that I was afraid of Mme. Mandilip. I hated her, yes—but I did not fear her. Knowing now her technique, it would be folly not to observe its results with myself as the laboratory experiment. I told myself that I had run the gamut of those suggestions—that whatever else it had been her intention to implant within my mind had been held back by my awakening—

Ah, but the dollmaker had spoken truth when she called me—fool!

WHEN Braile appeared, I was able to meet him calmly. Hardly had I greeted him when Ricori's nurse called up to say her patient was wide awake and anxious to see me.

I said to Braile: "This is fortunate. Come along. It will save me from telling the same story twice over."

He asked: "What story?"

"My interview with Mme. Mandilip."

He said, incredulously: "You've seen her?"

"I spent the afternoon with her." I was enjoying his amazement. "She is most—interesting. Come and hear about it."

I led the way rapidly to the annex, deaf to his questions. Ricori was sitting up. I made a brief examination. Although still somewhat weak, he could be discharged as a patient. I congratulated him on what was truly a remarkable recovery. I whispered to him:

"I've seen your witch—and talked to her. I have much to tell you. Bid your guards take their stations outside the door. I will dismiss the nurse for a time."

When guards and nurse were gone, I launched into the story of the day's happenings, beginning with my summons to the Gilmore apartment by McCann. Ricori, listened, face grim, to my recital. He said:

"Her brother—and now her husband! Poor, poor Mollie! But she shall be avenged! *Si*—greatly so!"

I came to the end of my tale. I told Ricori what I had bidden McCann to do. I said:

"And so tonight, at least, we can sleep in peace. For if the girl comes out with the dolls, McCann gets her. If she does not, then nothing can happen. I am quite certain that without her the dollmaker cannot strike. I hope you approve, Ricori."

He studied me for a moment, intently.

"I do approve, Dr. Lowell. Most greatly do I approve. You have done as I would have done. But—I do not think you have told us all that happened between you and the witch."

"Nor do I," said Braile.

"At any rate, I've told you the essentials. And I'm dead tired. I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. It's now nine thirty. If the girl does come out it won't be before eleven, probably later. I'm going to sleep until McCann fetches her. If he doesn't, I'm going to sleep all night. That's final. Save your questions for the morning."

Ricori's searching gaze had never left me. He said:

"Why not sleep here? Would it not be safer—for you?"

I succumbed to a wave of intense irritation. My pride had been hurt enough by my behavior with the dollmaker and

the manner in which she had outwitted me. And the suggestion that I hide from her behind the guns of his men opened the wound afresh. . .

"I am no child," I answered angrily "I am quite able to take care of myself I do not have to live behind a screen of gunmen—"

I stopped, sorry that I had said that. But Ricori betrayed no anger. He nodded, and dropped back on his pillows.

"You have told me what I wanted to know. You fared very badly with the witch, Dr. Lowell. And you have not told us all the—essentials."

I said: "I am sorry, Ricori."

"Don't be." For the first time he smiled. "I understand, perfectly. I also am somewhat of a psychologist. But I say this to you—it matters little whether McCann does or does not bring the girl to us tonight. Tomorrow the witch dies—and the girl with her."

I MADE no answer. I recalled the nurse, and re-stationed the guards within the room. Whatever confidence I might feel, I was taking no chances with Ricori's safety. I had not told him of the dollmaker's direct threat against him, but I had not forgotten it.

Braile accompanied me to my study. He said, apologetically:

"I know you must be tired, Lowell, and I don't want to pest you, but will you let me stay in your room with you while you are sleeping?"

I said with the same stubborn irritability: "For Lord's sake, Braile, didn't you hear what I told Ricori? I'm much obliged, and all of that, but it applies to you as well."

He said quietly: "I am going to stay right here in the study, wide awake, until McCann comes or dawn comes. If I hear any sounds in your room, I'm coming in. Whenever I want to take a look at you to see whether you are all right, I'm coming in. Don't lock your door, because if you do I'll break it down. Is that all quite clear?"

I grew angrier still. He said:

"I mean it."

I said: "All right. Do as you please."

I went into my bedroom, slamming the door. But I did not lock it.

I was tired, there was no doubt about that. Even an hour's sleep would be something. I decided not to bother with the bath, and began to undress. I was removing my shirt when I noticed a tiny pin upon its left side over my heart. I opened the shirt and looked at the under side. Fastened there was one of the knotted cords!

I took a step toward the door, mouth open to call Braile. Then stopped short. One of the things that I had not told was my hypnotization by the dollmaker. Obviously, if I showed the cord to Braile, revealed where I had found it, I could no longer conceal this part of my experiences. No, better say nothing. I reached for a match to burn the thing, heard Braile's step at the door and thrust it hastily in my trousers pocket.

"What do you want?" I called.

"Just want to see you get into bed all right."

He opened the door a trifle. What he wanted to discover, of course, was whether I had locked it. I said nothing.

My bedroom is a large, high-ceilinged room on the second floor of my home. It is at the back of the house, adjoining my study. There are two windows which look out on the little garden. They are framed by the creeper. The room has a chandelier, a massive, old-fashioned thing covered with long pendants of cut glass from which rise the candle holders. When I bought the house I would not allow it to be taken down, nor even be wired for electric bulbs.

My bed is at the end of the room, and when I turn upon my left side I can see the windows outlined by faint reflections. The same reflections are caught by the pendants so that the chandelier becomes a nebulously glimmering tiny cloud. It is restful, sleep-inducing. There is an ancient pear tree in the garden, the

last survivor of an orchard which in spring, in New York's halcyon days, lifted to the sun its flowered arms. The chandelier is near the foot of the bed. The switch which controls my lights is at the head of my bed. At the side of the room is an old fireplace, its sides of carved marble and with a wide mantel at top. To visualize fully what follows, it is necessary to keep this arrangement in mind.

By the time I had undressed, Braile, evidently assured of my docility, had closed the door and gone back into the study. I took the knotted cord, the witch's ladder, and threw it contemptuously on the table. I suppose there was something of bravado in the action; perhaps if I had not felt so sure of McCann I would have pursued my original intention of burning it. I mixed myself a sedative, turned off the lights and lay down to sleep. The sedative took quick effect.

I sank deep and deeper into a sea of sleep . . . deeper . . . and deeper. . . .

I looked around me . . . how had I come to this strange place? I was standing within a shallow circular pit, grass lined. The rim of the pit came only to my knees. The pit was in the center of a circular, level meadow perhaps a quarter of a mile in diameter. This, too, was covered with grass; strange grass, purple flowereted. Around the grassy circle drooped unfamiliar trees . . . trees scaled with emeralds green and scarlet . . . trees with pendulous branches covered with fern-like leaves and threaded with slender vines that were like serpents. The trees circled the meadow, watchful, alert . . . watching me . . . waiting for me to move. . . .

No, it was not the trees that were watching! There were things hidden among the trees . . . lurking . . . malignant things . . . evil things . . . and it was they who were watching me, waiting for me to move!

But how had I gotten here? I looked down at my legs, stretched my arms . . . I was clad in the blue pyjamas in which I had gone to bed . . . gone to my bed in my New York house . . . in my own house in New York . . . how had I come here? I did not seem to be asleep.

NOW I saw that three paths led out of the shallow pit. They passed over the edge, and stretched, each in a different direction, toward the woods. And suddenly I knew that I must take one of these paths, and that it was vitally important that I pick the right one . . . that only one could be traversed safely . . . that the other two would lead me into the power of those lurking things.

The pit began to contract. I felt its bottom lifting beneath my feet. The pit was thrusting me out. I leaped upon the path at my right and began to walk slowly along it. Then involuntarily I began to run, faster and faster along it, towards the woods. As I drew nearer I saw that the path pierced the woods straight as an arrow's flight, and that it was about three feet wide, and bordered closely by the trees, and that it vanished in the dim green distances. Faster and faster I ran. Now I had entered the woods, and the unseen things were gathering among the trees that bordered the path, thronging the borders, rushing silently from all the wood. What those things were, what they would do to me if they caught me I did not know . . . I only knew that nothing that I could imagine of horror or agony could equal what I would experience if they did catch me.

On and on I raced through the wood, each step a nightmare. I felt hands stretching out to clutch me . . . heard shrill whisperings. . . .

Sweating, trembling, I broke out of the wood and raced over a vast plain that stretched, treeless, to the distant horizon. The plain was trackless, pathless, and covered with brown and withered grass. It was like, it came to me, the blasted heath of Macbeth's three witches. No matter, it was better than the haunted wood. I paused and looked

back at the trees. I felt from them the gaze of myriads of the evil eyes.

I turned my back, and began to walk over the withered plain. I looked up at the sky. The sky was misty green. High up in it two cloudy orbs began to glow . . . black suns . . . no, they were not suns . . . they were eyes. . . .

The eyes of the dollmaker!

They stared down at me from the misty green sky. . . .

And now over the horizon of that strange world two gigantic hands began to lift . . . began to creep toward me . . . to catch me and hurl me back into the wood . . . white hands with long fingers . . . and each of the long white fingers a living thing. . . .

The hands of the dollmaker!

Closer came the eyes, and closer writhed the hands.

From the sky came peal upon peal of laughter. . . .

The laughter of the dollmaker!

That laughter still ringing in my ears, I awakened—or seemed to awaken. I was in my room, sitting bolt upright in my bed. I was wet with sweat, and my heart was pumping with a pulse that shook my body. I could see the chandelier glimmering in the light from the windows like a nebulous small cloud. I could see the windows faintly outlined . . . it was very still.

There was a movement at one of the windows. I would get up from the bed and see what it was—

I could not move!

A FAINT greenish glow began within the room. At first it was like the flickering phosphorescence one sees upon a decaying log. It waxed and waned, waxed and waned, but grew even stronger. My room became plain. The chandelier gleamed like a decayed emerald—

There was a little face at the window! A doll's face! My heart leaped, then curdled with despair. I thought: "McCann has failed! It is the end!"

The doll looked at me, grinning. Its face was smooth shaven, that of a man about forty. The nose was long, the mouth wide and thin-lipped. The eyes were close set under bushy brows. They glittered greenly. The doll crept over the sill. It slid, head-first, into the room. It stood for a moment on its hands, legs waving. It somersaulted twice. It came to its feet, one little hand at its lips, green eyes upon mine—waiting. As though expecting applause! It was dressed in the tights and jacket of a circus acrobat. It bowed to me. Then with a flourish, it pointed to the window.

Another little face was peering there. It was austere, cold, the face of a man of sixty. It had small side whiskers. It stared at me with the expression I supposed a banker might wear when someone he hates applies to him for a loan—I found the thought oddly amusing. Then abruptly ceased to feel amused.

A banker-doll! An acrobat-doll!

The dolls of two of those who had suffered the unknown death!

The banker-doll stepped with dignity down from the window. It was in full evening dress, swallowtails, stiff shirt; all perfect. It turned and with the same dignity raised a hand to the window sill. Another doll stood there—the doll of a woman about the same age as the banker-doll, and garbed like it in correct evening dress.

The spinster!

The spinster-doll took the proffered hand. She jumped lightly to the floor.

Through the window came a fourth doll, all in spangled tights from neck to feet. It took a flying leap, landing beside the acrobat-doll. It looked up at me with grinning face, then bowed.

The four dolls began to march toward me; the acrobats leading, and behind them with slow and stately step, the spinster-doll and banker-doll.

Grotesque, fantastic, these they were—but *not* humorous. Lord—no! Or if there was anything of humor about them, it was that at which only devils laugh.

I thought desperately: "Braile is just on the other side of the door. If I could only make some sound!"

The four dolls halted and seemed to consult. The acrobats pirouetted, and reached to their backs. They drew from the hidden sheaths their dagger-pins. In the hands of banker-doll and spinster-doll appeared similar weapons. They presented the points toward me.

The four resumed their march to my bed.

The eyes of the second acrobat-doll—the trapeze performer I knew him to be—had rested on the chandelier. He paused, studying it. He pointed to it, thrust the dagger-pin back into its sheath, and bent his knees, hands cupped in front of them. The first doll nodded, then stood, plainly measuring the height of the chandelier from the floor and considering the best approach to it. The second doll pointed to the mantel, and the pair of them swarmed up its sides to the broad ledge. The elderly pair watched them, seemingly much interested. They did not sheathe their dagger-pins.

The acrobat-doll bent, and the trapeze-doll put a little foot in its cupped hands. The first doll straightened, and the second flew across the gap between mantel and chandelier, caught one of the pendants, and swung. Immediately the other doll leaped outward, caught the chandelier and swung beside its spangled mate.

I saw the heavy old fixture tremble and sway. Down upon the floor came crashing a dozen of the pendants. In the dead stillness, it was like an explosion.

I heard Braile running to the door. He threw it open. He stood on the threshhold. I could see him plainly in the green glow, but I knew that he could not see—that to him the room was in darkness. He cried:

"Lowell! Are you all right? Turn on the lights!"

I tried to call out. To warn him.

He groped forward, around the foot of the bed, to the switch. I think that then he saw the dolls. He stopped short, directly beneath the chandelier, looking up.

And as he did so the doll above him swung by one hand, drew its dagger-pin from its sheath and dropped upon Braile's shoulders, stabbing viciously at his throat!

Braile shrieked — once. The shriek changed into a dreadful bubbling sigh.

And then I saw the chandelier sway and lurch. It broke from its ancient fastenings. It fell with a crash that shook the house, down upon Braile and the doll-devil ripping at his throat.

Abruptly the green glow disappeared. There was a scurrying in the room like the running of great rats.

The paralysis dropped from me. I threw my hands round to the switch and turned on the lights; leaped from the bed.

Little figures were scrambling up and out of the window. There were four muffled reports like pop-guns. I saw Ricori at the door, on each side of him a guard with silenced automatic, shooting at the window.

I bent over Braile. He was quite dead. The falling chandelier had dropped upon his head, crushing the skull. But—

Braile had been dying before the chandelier had fallen.

His carotid artery was severed.

The doll that had murdered him—was gone!

CHAPTER XVII

THE WITCH GIRL

I STOOD up. I said bitterly: "You were right, Ricori—her servants are better than yours."

He did not answer, looking down at Braile with pity filled face.

I said: "If all your men fulfill their promises like McCann, that you are still alive I count as one of the major miracles."

"As for McCann"—he turned his gaze to me somberly—"he is both intelligent and loyal. I will not condemn him unheard. And I say to you, Dr. Lowell, that if you had shown more frankness to me this night, Dr. Braile would not be dead."

I winced at that—there was too much truth in it. I was wracked by regret and grief and helpless rage. If I had not let my cursed pride control me, if I had told them all that I could of my encounter with the dollmaker, explained why there were details I was unable to tell, given myself over to Braile for a cleansing counter-hypnotization—no, if I had but accepted Ricori's offer of protection or Braile's to watch over me while asleep—then this could not have happened.

I looked into the study and saw there Ricori's nurse. I could hear whispering outside the study doors—servants, and others from the annex who had been attracted by the noise of the falling chandelier. I said to the nurse:

"The chandelier fell while Dr. Braile was standing beside my bed talking to me. It has killed him. But do not tell the others that. Simply say that the chandelier fell, injuring Dr. Braile. Send them back to their beds—say that we are taking Dr. Braile to the hospital. Then return with Porter and clean up what you can of the blood. Leave the chandelier as it is."

When she had gone I turned to Ricori's gunmen.

"What did you see when you shot?"

One answered: "They looked like monkeys to me."

The other said: "Or midgets."

I looked at Ricori and read in his face what he had seen. I stripped the light blanket from the bed.

"Ricori," I said, "have your men lift Braile and wrap him in this. Then have them carry him into the small room next the study and place him on the cot."

He nodded to them, and they raised Braile from the débris of shattered glass and bent metal. His face and neck had been cut by the broken pendants, and by some chance one of these wounds was close to the spot where the dagger-pin of the doll had been thrust. It was deep, and had probably caused a second severance of the carotid. I followed with Ricori into the small room. The men placed the body on the cot, and Ricori ordered them back to the bedroom to watch while the nurses were there. He closed the door, then turned to me.

"What are you going to do, Dr. Lowell?"

What I felt like doing was weeping, but I answered:

"It is a coroner's case, of course. I must notify the police at once."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"What did you see at the window, Ricori?"

"I saw—the dolls!"

"And I. Can I tell the police that? You know I cannot. No, I shall tell them that we were talking when, without warning, the fixture dropped upon him. Splintered glass from the pendants pierced his throat. What else can I say? They will believe that readily enough when they would not believe the truth—"

I hesitated; then my reserve broke; for the first time in many years I wept.

"Ricori—you were right. Not McCann but I am to blame for this . . . the vanity of an old man . . . if I had spoken freely, fully . . . he would be alive . . . but I did not . . . I did not. I am his murderer . . ."

He comforted me—gently as a woman.

"It was not your fault. You could not have done otherwise, being what you are, thinking as you have so long thought. If in your unbelief, your entirely natural unbelief, the witch found her opportunity, still, it was not your fault. But now she will find no more opportunities. Her cup is full and overflowing."

He put his hands on my shoulders.

"Do not notify the police for a time—not until we hear from McCann. It is

now close to twelve, and he will telephone even if he does not come. When I have heard from McCann—I must leave you."

"What do you mean to do, Ricori?"

"Kill the witch," he answered quietly. "Both her and the girl. Before the day comes. I have waited too long. I will wait no longer. She shall kill no more."

I FELT a wave of weakness, my sight dimmed. I sank into a chair. After all—it must be. And yet I recoiled from it, now that it was on the very threshold of being. I opened my eyes. Ricori was lifting a glass of water to my lips. I drank, thirstily. I heard through the roaring in my ears a knocking at the door and the voice of one of Ricori's men:

"McCann is here."

Ricori said: "Tell him to come in at once."

The door opened. McCann strode into the room. He closed the door behind him and turned, his eyes gleaming—

"I got her—"

He stopped short, staring at us. His eyes fell upon the covered body upon the cot and his face grew grim:

"What's happened?"

Ricori answered: "The dolls killed Dr. Braile. You captured the girl too late, McCann. Why?"

"Killed Braile? The dolls! Good heavens!" McCann's voice was as though a hand had gripped his throat.

Ricori asked: "Where is the girl, Mccann?"

He answered, dully: "Down in the car, gagged and tied."

Ricori asked: "*When* did you get her and *where?*"

Looking at McCann, I suddenly felt a pity and sympathy for him. It sprang from my own remorse and shame. I said:

"Sit down, McCann. I am far more to blame for what has happened than you can possibly be."

Ricori said, coldly: "Leave me to judge that. McCann, did you place cars at each end of the street, as Dr. Lowell instructed?"

"Yes."

"Then begin your story at that point."

McCann said: "She comes into the street. It's close to eleven. I'm at the east end an' Paul at the west. I say to Tony: 'We got the wench pocketed!' She carries two suitcases. She looks around an' trots where we located her car. She opens the door. When she comes out she rides west where Paul is. I've told Paul what the doc tells me, not to grab her too close to the dollshop. I see Paul tail her. I shoot right down the street and tail Paul.

"The sedan turns into West Broadway. There she gets the break. A Staten Island boat is just in an' the street's lousy with a herd of cars. A Ford shoots over to the left, trying to pass another. Paul hits the Ford and wraps himself round one of the L pillars. There's a mess. I'm a minute or two getting outa the jam. When I do, the sedan's outa sight.

"I hop down an' telephone Rod. I tell him to stick a couple more cars quick at each end of the street. I tell him to get the wench when she shows up, even if they have to rope her off the steps of the doll shop. An' when they get her to bring her right here.

"I come up here. I figure maybe she's headed this way. I coast along by here an' then take a look in the Park. I figure the doll-hag's been getting all the breaks an' now one's due me. I get it. I see the sedan parked under some trees. We get the gal. She don't put up no fight at all. But we gag her in the car. Tony rolls the sedan away an' searches it. There ain't a thing in it but the two suitcases an' they're empty. We bring the gal here."

I asked: "How long between when you caught the girl and your arrival?"

"Ten—fifteen minutes, maybe. Tony nigh tore the sedan to pieces. An' that took a little time."

I looked at Ricori; McCann must have come upon the girl just about the moment Braile had died. He nodded.

"She was waiting for the dolls, of course."

McCANN asked: "What do you want me to do with her?"

He looked at Ricori, not at me. Ricori said nothing, staring at McCann with a curious intentness. But I saw him clench his left hand, then open it, fingers wide. McCann said:

"Okay, boss."

He started toward the door. It did not take unusual acumen to know that he had been given his orders nor could their significance be mistaken.

"Stop!" I intercepted him, and stood with my back against the door. "Listen to me, Ricori. I have something to say about this. Dr. Braile was as close to me as Peters to you. Whatever the guilt of Mme. Mandilip, the girl is helpless to do other than what she orders her. Her will is absolutely controlled by the dollmaker. I strongly suspect that a good part of the time she is under complete hypnotic control. And I cannot forget that she tried to save Walters."

Ricori said: "If you are right, all the more reason why she should be destroyed quickly. Then the witch cannot use her before she herself dies."

"I will not have it, Ricori. And there is another reason. I want to question her. I may discover how Mme. Mandilip does these things—the mystery of the dolls—the ingredients of the salve—whether there are others who share her knowledge. All this and more, the girl may know. And if she does know, I can make her tell."

McCann said, cynically: "Yeah?"

Ricori asked: "How?"

I answered, grimly: "By using the same trap in which the dollmaker caught me."

CHAPTER XVIII

END OF THE WITCH GIRL

FOR a full minute Ricori considered me gravely.

"Dr. Lowell," he said, "for the last time I yield my judgment to yours in this matter. I think you are wrong. I know that I was wrong when I did not kill the witch that day I met her. I believe that every moment this girl is permitted to remain alive is a moment laden with danger for us all. Nevertheless, I yield—for this last time."

"McCann," I said, "bring the girl into my office. Wait until I get rid of anyone who may be downstairs."

I went downstairs, McCann and Ricori following. No one was there. I placed on my desk a development of the Luys mirror, a device used first at the Salpetriere in Paris to induce the hypnotic sleep. It consists of two parallel rows of small reflectors revolving in opposite directions. A ray of light plays upon them in such a manner as to cause their surfaces alternately to gleam and darken. A most useful device, and one to which I believed the girl, long sensitized to hypnotic suggestion, must speedily succumb. I placed a comfortable chair at the proper angle and subdued the lights so that they would not compete with the mirrors.

I had hardly completed these arrangements when McCann and another of Ricori's men brought in the girl. They placed her in the easy chair, and I took from her lips the cloth with which she had been silenced.

Ricori said: "Tony, go out to the car. McCann, you stay here."

The girl made no resistance whatever. She seemed entirely withdrawn into herself, looking up at me with the same vague stare I had noted on my visit to the doll shop. I took her hands. She let them rest passively in mine. They were very cold. I spoke to her gently, reassuringly:

"My child, no one is going to hurt you. Rest and relax. Sink back in the chair. I only want to help you. Sleep if you wish. Sleep."

She did not seem to hear, still regarding me with that vague gaze. I released her hands. I took my own chair, facing

The dagger plunged as brilliant flame wrapped around the doll-maker

her and setting the little mirrors revolving. Her eyes turned to them at once; rested upon them fascinated. I watched her body relax; she sank back in the chair. Her eyelids began to droop—

"Sleep," I said softly. "Here no one can harm you. While you sleep none can harm you. Sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

Her eyes closed. She sighed.

I said: "You are asleep. You will not awaken until I bid you. You cannot awaken until I bid you."

She repeated in a murmuring, childish voice: "I am asleep. I cannot awaken until you bid me."

I STOPPED the whirling mirrors. I said to her: "There are some questions I am going to ask you. You will listen, and you will answer me truthfully. You cannot answer them except truthfully. You know that."

She echoed, still in that faint childish voice: "I must answer you truthfully. I know that."

I could not refrain from darting a glance of triumph at Ricori and McCann. Ricori was crossing himself, looking at me with wide eyes in which were both doubt and awe. McCann sat chewing nervously, staring at the girl.

I began my questions, choosing at first those least likely to disturb. I asked:

"Are you truly Mme. Mandilip's niece?"

"No."

"Who are you, then?"

"I do not know."

"When did you join her, and why?"

"Twenty years ago. I was in a *creche*, a foundling asylum at Vienna. She took me from it. She taught me to call her aunt. But she is not my aunt."

"Where have you lived since then?"

"In Berlin, in Paris, then London, Prague, Warsaw."

"Did Mme. Mandilip make her dolls in each of these places?"

She did not answer; she shuddered; her eyelids began to tremble.

"Sleep! Remember, you cannot awaken until I bid you! Sleep! Answer me."

She whispered: "Yes."

"And they killed in each city?"

"Yes."

"Sleep. Be at ease. Nothing is going to harm you—" Her disquietude had become marked, and I veered for a moment from the subject of the dolls. "Where was Mme. Mandilip born?"

"I do not know."

"How old is she?"

"I do not know. I have asked her, and she has laughed and said that time is nothing to her. I was five years old when she took me. She looked then just as she does now."

"Has she any accomplices—I mean are there others who make the dolls?"

"One. She taught him. He was her lover in Prague."

"Her lover!" I exclaimed, incredulously—the image of the immense gross body, the great breasts, the heavy horselike face of the dollmaker rising before my eyes. She said:

"I know what you are thinking. But she has another body. She wears it when she pleases. It is a beautiful body. It belongs to her eyes, her hands, her voice. When she wears that body she is beautiful, terrifyingly beautiful. I have often seen her wear it."

Another body! An illusion, of course . . like the enchanted room Walters had described, and which I had glimpsed when breaking from the hypnotic web . . . a picture drawn by the dollmaker in the mind of the girl. I dismissed that, and drove again to the heart of the matter

"She kills by two methods, does she not—by the salve and by the dolls?

"How many has she killed by the unguent in New York?"

She answered, indirectly: "She has made fourteen dolls since we came here."

So there were other cases that had not been reported to me! I asked:

"And how many have the dolls killed?"

"Twenty."

I heard Ricori curse, and shot him a warning look. He was leaning forward, white and tense; McCann had stopped his chewing.

"How does she make the dolls?"

"I do not know."

"Do you know how she prepares the unguent?"

"No. She does that secretly."

"What is it that activates the dolls?"

"You mean makes them—alive?"

"Yes."

"Something from the dead!"

Again I heard Ricori curse. I said: "If you do not know how the dolls are made, you must know what is necessary to make them—alive. What is it?"

She did not answer.

"You must answer me. You must obey me. Speak!"

She said: "Your question is not clear. I have told you that something of the dead makes them alive. What else is it you would know?"

"Begin from where one who poses for a doll first meets Mme. Mandilip. And go to the last step when the doll, as you put it—becomes alive."

"She has said one must come to her of his own will. He must consent of his own volition, without coercion, to let her make the doll. That he does not know to what he is consenting matters nothing. She must begin the first model immediately. Before she completes the second—the doll that is to live—she must find opportunity to apply the unguent. She has said of this unguent that it liberates one of those who dwell within the mind, and that this one must come to her and enter the doll. She has said that this one is not the sole tenant of the mind, but with the others she has no concern. Nor does she select all or any of those who come before her. How she knows those with whom she can deal, or what there is about them which makes her select them, I do not know. She makes the second doll. At the instant of its completion, he who has posed for it begins to die. When he is dead—the doll lives. It obeys her—as they all obey her. . . ."

She paused, then said musingly . . . "All except one—"

"And that one?"

"She who was your nurse. She will not obey. My—aunt—torments her, punishes her . . . still she cannot control her. I brought the little nurse here last night with another doll to kill the man my—aunt—cursed. The nurse came, but she fought the other doll and saved the man. It is something my aunt cannot understand it perplexes her . . . and it gives me . . . hope!"

HER voice trailed away. Then suddenly, with energy, she said: "You must make haste. I should be back with the dolls. Soon she will be searching for me. I must go or she will come for me . . and then . . . if she finds me here . . . she will kill me. . . ."

I said: "You brought the dolls to kill me?"

"Of course."

"Where are the dolls now?"

She answered: "They were coming back to me. Your men caught me before they could reach me. They will go . . . home. The dolls travel quickly when they must. It is more difficult without me . . . that is all . . . but they will return to her."

"Why do the dolls kill?"

"To . . . please . . . her."

I asked: "The knotted cord, what part does it play?"

She answered: "I do not know—but she says—" then suddenly, desperately, like a frightened child, she whispered: "She is searching for me. Her eyes are looking for me . . . her hands are groping . . she sees me! Hide me! Oh, hide me from her . . . quick. . . ."

I said: "Sleep more deeply! Go down—down deep—deeper still into sleep. *Now* she cannot find you! *Now* you are hidden from her!"

She whispered: "I am deep in sleep. She has lost me. I am hidden. But she

is hovering over me . . . she is still searching."

Ricori and McCann had left their chairs, and were beside me. Ricori asked: "You believe the witch is after her?"

"No," I answered. "This is not an unexpected development. The girl has been under the woman's control so long, and so completely, that the reaction is natural. It may be the result of suggestion, or it may be the reasoning of her own subconsciousness . . . she has been breaking commands . . . she has been threatened with punishment if she should—"

The girl screamed, agonized:

"She sees me! She has found me! Her hands are reaching out to me!"

"Sleep! Sleep deeper still! She cannot hurt you. Again she has lost you!"

The girl did not answer, but a faint moaning was audible, deep in her throat.

McCann swore, huskily: "Lord! Can't you help her?"

Ricori, eyes unnaturally bright in a chalky face, said: "Let her die! It will save us trouble!"

I said to the girl, sternly:

"Listen to me and obey I am going to count five. When I come to five—awaken! Awaken at once! You will come up from sleep so swiftly that she cannot catch you! Obey!"

I counted, slowly, since to have awakened her so swiftly would, in all likelihood, have brought her the death which her distorted mind told her was threatened by the dollmaker.

"One—two—three—"

An appalling scream came from the girl. And then—

"She's caught me! Her hands are around my heart . . . Ah-h-h: . . ."

Her body bent; a spasm ran through her. Her body relaxed and sank limply in the chair. Her eyes opened, stared glassily; her jaw dropped.

I ripped open her bodice, set my stethoscope to her heart. It was still.

And then from the girl's throat issued a voice, organ-toned, sweet, laden with menace and contempt. . . .

"You fools!"

The voice of Mme. Mandilip!

CHAPTER XIX

"BURN, WITCH, BURN!"

CURIOUSLY enough, Ricori was the least affected of the three of us. My own flesh had crept. McCann, although he had never heard the dollmaker's voice, was greatly shaken. And it was Ricori who broke the silence.

"You are sure the girl is dead?"

"There is no possible doubt of it."

He nodded to McCann. "Carry her down to the car."

I asked: "What are you going to do?"

He answered: "Kill the witch." He quoted with satiric unctuousness: "In death they shall not be divided." He said, passionately: "As in Hell they shall burn together *forever!*"

"You do not approve of this, Dr. Lowell." He looked at me, sharply.

"Ricori, I don't know—I honestly do not know. Today I would have killed her with my own hands, but now that rage is spent . . . what you have threatened is against all my instincts, all my habits of thought, all my convictions of how justice should be administered. It seems to me—murder!"

He said: "You heard the girl Twenty killed here by the dolls. And twelve dolls. Twelve who died as Peters did!"

"But, Ricori, no court could consider allegations under hypnosis as evidence. It may be true, it may not be. The girl was abnormal. What she told might be only her imaginings—without supporting evidence, no court on earth could accept it as a basis for action."

He said: "No—no *earthly* court—" He gripped my shoulders. He asked: "Do you believe it was truth?"

I could not answer, for deep within me I felt it was truth. He said:

"Precisely, Dr. Lowell! You have answered me. You know, as I know, that the girl did speak the truth. You know, as

I know, that our law cannot punish the witch. That is why *I* must kill her. In doing that, I, Ricori, am no murderer. No, I am God's executioner!"

He waited for me to speak. Again I could not answer.

"McCann"—he pointed to the girl—"do as I told you. Then return."

And when McCann had gone out with the frail body in his arms, Ricori turned to me.

"Dr. Lowell—you must go with me to witness this execution."

I recoiled at that. I said:

"Ricori, I can't. I am utterly weary—in body and mind. I have gone through too much today. I am broken with grief—"

"You must go," he interrupted, "if we have to carry you gagged as the girl was, and bound. I will tell you why. You are at war with yourself. Alone it is possible your scientific doubts might conquer, that you would attempt to halt me before I have done what I swear by my hopes of Heaven I shall do. You might even yield to weariness and place the whole matter before the police. I will not take that risk. I have affection for you, Dr. Lowell, deep affection. But I tell you that if my own mother tried to stop me in this I would sweep her aside as ruthlessly as I shall you."

I said: "I will go with you."

"Then, until all is over, we remain together. I am taking no more chances."

I TOOK up the telephone and gave the necessary order. McCann returned, and Ricori said to him: "We go to the doll shop. Who is in the car with Tony?"

"Larson and Cartello."

"Good. It may be that the witch knows we are coming. It may be that she has listened through the girl's dead ears as she spoke from her dead throat. No matter. Are there bars on the door?"

McCann said: "Boss, I ain't been in the shop. I don't know. There's a glass panel. If there's bars we can work 'em. Tony'll get the tools."

"Dr. Lowell"—Ricori turned to me—"will you give me your word that you will not change your mind about going with me? Nor attempt to interfere in what I am going to do?"

"I give you my word, Ricori."

"McCann, you need not come back. Wait for us in the car."

As I walked with Ricori out of my house, a clock struck one. I remembered that this strange adventure had begun, weeks ago, at that very hour.

I rode in the back of the car with Ricori, the dead girl between us. On the middle seats were Larson and Cartello, the former a stolid Swede, the latter a wiry little Italian. The man named Tony drove, McCann beside him. We swung down the avenue and in about half an hour were on lower Broadway. As we drew near the street of the dollmaker, we went less quickly The sky was overcast, a cold wind blowing off the bay. I shivered, but not with cold.

We came to the corner of the dollmaker's street. For several blocks we had met no one, seen no one. It was as though we were passing through a city of the dead. Equally deserted was the street of the dollmaker.

Ricori said to Tony:

"Draw up opposite the doll shop. We'll get out. Then go down to the corner. Wait for us there."

My heart was beating uncomfortably. There was a quality of blackness in the night that seemed to swallow up the glow from the street lamps. There was no light on the dollmaker's shop, and in the old-fashioned doorway, set level with the street, the shadows clustered. The wind whined, and I could hear the beating of waves on the Battery wall. I wondered whether I would be able to go through that doorway, or whether the inhibition the dollmaker had put upon me still held me.

McCann slipped out of the car, carrying the girl's body. He propped her, sitting, in the doorway's shadows. Ricori and I, Larson and Cartello followed.

The car rolled off. And again I felt the sense of nightmare unreality which had clung to me so often since I had first set my feet on this strange path.

The little Italian smeared the glass of the door with some gummy material. In the center of it he fixed a small vacuum cup of rubber. He took a tool from his pocket and drew with it on the glass a foot-wide circle. The point of the tool cut into it as though it had been wax. Holding the vacuum cup in one hand, he tapped lightly with a rubber-tipped hammer. The circle of glass came away in his hand. All had been done without the least sound. He reached through the hole and fumbled about noiselessly for a few moments. There was a faint click The door swung open.

McCann picked up the dead girl. We went, silent as phantoms, into the doll shop. The little Italian set the circle of glass back in its place. I could dimly see the door that opened into the corridor leading to that evil room at the rear The little Italian tried the knob. The door was locked. He worked for a few seconds, and the door swung open. Ricori leading, McCann behind him with the girl, we passed like shadows through the corridor and paused at the farther door—

The door swung open!

WE HEARD the voice of the dollmaker: "Enter, gentlemen. It was thoughtful of you to bring back my dear niece! I would have met you at my outer door—but I am an old woman, and timid!"

McCann whispered: "One side, boss!"

He shifted the body of the girl to his left arm, and holding her like a shield, pistol drawn, began to edge by Ricori. Ricori thrust him away. His own automatic leveled, he stepped over the threshold. I followed McCann, the two gunmen at my back.

I took a swift glance around the room. The dollmaker sat at her table, sewing. She was serene, apparently untroubled. Her long white fingers danced to the rhythm of her stitches. She did not look up at us. There were coals burning in the fireplace. The room was very warm, and there was a strong aromatic odor, unfamiliar to me. I looked toward the cabinets of the dolls.

Every cabinet was open. Dolls stood within them, row upon row, staring down at us with eyes green and blue, gray and black, life-like as though they were midgets on exhibition in some grotesque peep-show. There must have been a hundred of them. Some were dressed as we in America dress; some as the Germans do; some as the Spanish, the French, the English; others were in costumes I did not recognize. A ballerina, and a blacksmith with his hammer raised . . . a French chevalier, and a German student, broadsword in hand, livid scars upon his face . . . an Apache with knife in hand, drug-madness on his yellow face, and next to him a vicious-mouthed woman of the streets, and next to her a jockey. . . .

The loot of the dollmaker from a dozen lands!

The dolls seemed to be poised to leap. To flow down upon us. Overwhelm us.

I steadied my thoughts; I forced myself to meet that battery of living dolls' eyes as though they were but lifeless dolls.

There was an empty cabinet . . . another and another . . . five cabinets without dolls. The four dolls I had watched march upon me in the paralysis of the green glow were not there . . . nor was Walters. . . .

I wrenched my gaze away from the tiers of the watching dolls. I looked again at the dollmaker, still placidly sewing . . . as though she were alone . . . as though she were unaware of us . . . as though Ricori's pistol were not pointed at her heart . . . sewing . . . singing softly—

The Walters doll was on the table before her!

It lay prone on its back. Its tiny hands were fettered at the wrists with twisted cords of ashen-yellow hair. They were

bound round and round, and the fettered hands clutched the hilt of a dagger-pin!

Long in the telling, but brief in the seeing—a few seconds in time as we measure it.

The dollmaker's absorption in her sewing, her utter indifference to us, the silence, made a screen between us and her, an ever thickening though invisible barrier. The pungent aromatic fragrance grew stronger. The silence was the warp of the screen and the strange fragrance the woof of it. Silence and scent knit on that screen as busily as sewed the white fingers of the dollmaker.

McCann dropped the body of the girl on the floor. He tried to speak—once, twice; at the third attempt he succeeded. He said to Ricori hoarsely, in a strangled voice:

"Kill her . . . or I will—"

RICORI did not move. He stood rigid. automatic pointed at the dollmaker's heart, eyes fixed on her dancing hands. He did not seem to hear McCann, or if he heard, he did not heed. The dollmaker's song went on . . . it was like the hum of bees . . . it was a sweet droning . . . it garnered sleep as the bees garner honey . . . sleep. . . .

Ricori shifted his grip upon his gun. He sprang forward. He swung the butt of the pistol down upon the wrists of the dollmaker.

Her hands dropped, the fingers writhed . . . hideously the long white fingers writhed and twisted . . . like serpents whose backs have been broken. . . .

Ricori raised the gun for a second blow. Before it could fall the dollmaker had leaped to her feet, overturning her chair. A whispering ran over the cabinets like a thin veil of sound. The dolls seemed to bend, to lean forward. . . .

The dollmaker's eyes were on us now. They seemed to take in each and all of us at once. And they were like flaming black suns in which danced tiny crimson flames.

Her will swept out and overwhelmed us. It was like a wave, tangible. I felt it strike me as though it were a material thing. A numbness began to creep through me. I saw the hand of Ricori that clutched the pistol twitch and whiten, the fingers strain to press the trigger. I knew that same numbness was gripping him . . . as it gripped McCann and the others. . . .

That once more the dollmaker had trapped us!

I whispered: "Don't look at her, Ricori . . . don't look in her eyes—"

With a tearing effort I wrested my own away from those flaming black ones. They fell upon the Walters doll. Stiffly, I reached to take it up—why, I did not know. The hand of the dollmaker was quicker than mine. She snatched it, and held it to her breast. She cried, in a voice whose vibrant sweetness ran through every nerve, augmenting the creeping lethargy:

"You will not look at me? You will not look at me! Fools—you can do nothing else!"

Then began that strange, utterly strange episode which was the beginning of the end.

The aromatic fragrance seemed to pulse, to throb, grew stronger. Something like a sparkling mist whirled out of nothingness and covered the dollmaker, veiling the horselike face, the ponderous body. Only her eyes shone through that mist—

The mist cleared away. Before us stood a woman of breath-taking beauty—tall and slender and exquisite! Naked! Her hair, black and silken fine, half-clothed her to her knees. Through it the pale golden flesh gleamed. Only the eyes, the hands of the doll, now unbound, still clasped to one of the round, high breasts told who she was.

Ricori's automatic dropped from his hand. I heard the weapons of the others fall to the floor. I knew they stood rigid as I, stunned by that incredible transformation, and helpless in the grip of the power streaming from the dollmaker.

She pointed to Ricori and laughed: "You would kill me—*me*! Pick up your weapon, Ricori—and try!"

Ricori's body bent slowly . . . slowly . . . I could see him only indirectly for my eyes could not leave the woman's . . . and I knew that his could not . . . that, fastened by them, his eyes were turning upward, upward as he bent. I sensed rather than saw that his groping hand had touched his pistol—that he was trying to lift it. I heard him groan. The dollmaker laughed again.

"Enough, Ricori—you cannot!"

Ricori's body straightened with a snap, as though a hand had clutched his chin and thrust him up—

There was a rustling behind me, the patter of little feet, the scurrying of small bodies past me.

AT THE feet of the woman were four manikins . . . the four who had marched upon me in the green glow . . . banker-doll, spinster-doll, the acrobat, the trapeze performer.

They stood, the four of them, ranged in front of her, glaring at us. In the hand of each was a dagger-pin, points thrust at us like tiny swords. And once more the laughter of the woman filled the room. She spoke, caressingly:

"No, no, my little ones; I do not need you!"

She pointed to me.

"You know this body of mine is but illusion, do you not? Speak!"

"Yes."

"And these at my feet—and all my little ones—are but illusions?"

I said: "I do not know that."

"You know too much—and you know too little. Therefore you must die, my too wise and too foolish doctor—" The great eyes dwelt upon me with mocking pity, the lovely face became maliciously pitiful. "And Ricori, too, must die—because he knows too much. And you others—you, too, must die. But not at the hands of my little people. Not here, no! At your home, my good doctor. You will go there silently—speaking neither among yourselves nor to any others on your way. And when there, you will turn upon yourselves . . . each slaying the other . . . rending yourselves like wolves . . . like—"

She staggered back a step, reeling.

I saw—or thought I saw the doll of Walters writhe. Then, swift as a striking snake, raise its hands and thrust the dagger-pin into the dollmaker's breast . . . twist it savagely . . . and thrust and thrust again . . . stabbing at last the golden throat of the woman precisely where that other doll had stabbed Braile!

And as Braile had screamed—so now screamed the dollmaker.

She tore the doll from her breast. She hurled it from her. The doll hurtled toward the fireplace, rolled, and touched the glowing coals.

There was a flash of brilliant flame, a wave of that same intense heat I had felt when the match of McCann had struck the Peters doll. And instantly, at the touch of that heat, the dolls at the woman's feet vanished. From them rose swiftly a pillar of the brilliant flame. It coiled and wrapped itself around the dollmaker, from feet to head.

I saw the shape of beauty melt away. In its place was the horselike face, the immense body of Mme. Mandilip . . . eyes seared and blind . . . the long white hands clutching at her torn throat, and no longer white, but crimson with her blood. Thus for an instant she stood, then toppled to the floor.

And at the instant of her fall, the spell that had held us was broken.

Ricori leaned toward the huddled hulk that had been the dollmaker and spat upon it. He shouted, exultantly:

"Burn, Witch, burn!"

He pushed me to the door, pointing toward the tiers of the watching dolls that strangely now seemed lifeless! Only—dolls!

Fire was leaping to them from draperies and curtains. The fire was leaping at them as though it were some vengeful spirit of cleansing flame!

We rushed through the door, the corridor, out into the shop. Through the corridor and into the shop the flames poured after us. We ran into the street.

Ricori cried: "Quick! To the car!"

Suddenly the street was red with the light of the flames. I heard windows opening, and shouts of warning and alarm. We swung into the waiting car and it leaped away.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT WAS SHE?

THREE weeks had passed since the events I have just narrated. I sat with Ricori in a pleasant country place. I had been quite ill—the continuous strain, the shock of Braile's death, the destructively alien quality of so many of the experiences I had passed through, had all combined to bring about a breakdown. But as I rested in this quiet, guarded spot to which Ricori had brought me for my convalescence, the most disturbing elements seemed to have retreated over the rim of the world. The nightmare depression and anxiety had vanished. That day, for the first time, I had been able to go over the whole case thoroughly and dispassionately, putting Ricori in possession of phases of it which hitherto he had not known. I had found further relief in doing so.

Ricori spoke, breaking a long silence.

"Now, after this lapse of time, when you can look back on all these things, see them in perspective—what, do you think, *was* Mme. Mandilip?"

"She was a murderess," I answered. "No doubt of that. Her unguent killed. Also, she was an extraordinary hypnotist, a mistress of illusion—it may be the greatest that ever lived."

He asked: "And nothing more?"

I hesitated, then answered: "Except the deaths by the unguent, much of what we saw was hallucinatory. Like the things seen in delirium, whether produced by fever or drink or drugs. Or seen in a dream. They occurred, or seemed to occur, after contact with the woman—either personal contact or contact with that peculiar mechanism, for mechanism I believe it to have been, the knotted cord of hair. It is probable, therefore, that many of the things we witnessed were illusions produced by her."

"You do not think the dolls were real?"

"The dolls were real enough," I said. "The illusion was in what we saw them do—perhaps."

He echoed, ironically: "Perhaps!"

I said: "It is possible that the woman had discovered physical laws still unknown to us. If the dolls did act, then it could not be otherwise than by such laws. And the woman was equally bound by them. Unknown laws, yes—but natural laws which the dolls and she must obey."

"But if the dolls' actions were not real, if they were illusion, hallucination, why did more than one of us, at precisely the same time, see precisely the same things?"

"You know how real was that illusion of a beautiful body. Yet we know it was not. We saw it dissolve in the flames. But it had seemed as veritable as the actions of the dolls. It was mass hypnotism, Ricori—the same suggestions impressed simultaneously upon a plurality of minds. It is well known that some East Indian adepts can accomplish this. It is well known that it has reached a high degree of development in Tibet. No witchcraft nor sorcery in that, Ricori."

He asked: "You say if it were illusion, personal contact with the woman or contact with the knotted cord was essential to produce it?"

"I think so."

"Then explain the attack upon the too convivial gentleman in the park. He knew nothing of Mme. Mandilip, nor had he been given the cord. I pass over Shevlin, because, after all, he did not see the doll until it had been crushed by the car."

I said: "I have admitted the possibility of physical laws unknown to us. And yet, we have only the wastrel's word that the wounds upon his legs were made by the doll. None, as you point out, witnessed the attack."

HE LOOKED at me, wonderingly. "Is it your idea that the discovery of this doll close by, and soon after the man had told his circumstantial story—and the same doll, mind you, which had shortly before attacked me—is it your idea that this discovery was merely a coincidence?"

"I did not say that." I moved, uncomfortably. "I do say that we have no real evidence that it was *not* a coincidence. And as for the attack on you, Ricori—well, it is perfectly possible that there was none. Entirely possible that, obeying the command of the dollmaker impressed upon you during your encounter in the shop, you, *yourself*, took the hand of the doll and thrust the dagger-pin into your own breast."

He murmered: "My dear doctor—your explanation seems as incredible to me as mine would be to you."

I said, with some heat: "My explanation is entirely within the possibilities of hypnotic phenomena."

He smiled, and asked: "You have said that the dolls, assuming they actually did what we thought we saw them do, must have obeyed an unbreakable natural law which bound the dollmaker as well?"

"Yes. It was either that or illusion. There can be no other explanations. Nothing of soul, or mind, or other intangible essence of those in whose likenesses they were made, animated them. The dolls were material. Therefore they could obey only material laws. The immaterial cannot command material laws. Therefore it cannot affect us—who are material. Any spiritual essence we possess cannot be material, Ricori. If it were, it would have been isolated and analyzed long ago. If the actions of the dolls were real, their activation could come only from the dollmaker."

He said, blandly: "Then how account for the actions of the little nurse? Why did she not obey this unknown law—and also, therefore, the dollmaker? The little nurse would not obey—and so saved us all. The girl said she would not obey. The woman told you she would not. And at the end the little nurse killed the witch. Or is it that you think the witch killed herself?"

Now I had given much thought to that, and I answered him as I had answered myself:

"Precisely so! And for the disobedience of the doll, we have only the statements of the girl and the woman. The girl was manifestly under the absolute control of Mme. Mandilip, obeying her will, thinking as Mme. Mandilip bade her think.

"It is probable that her strange mind was at times the victim of the same illusions she induced in others. That at times she, herself, considered the dolls alive. It is probable that in this strange mind was conceived a hatred for the doll of Walters. And that at the last, under the stimulation of our entry, this belief reacted upon her. She thought the doll alive; she hated it; she tormented it; she expected the doll to avenge itself if it had the opportunity.

"So strong was the expectation that when the favorable moment arrived it took form in action. Mme. Mandilip, like you perhaps, unconsciously manipulated the doll—and plunged the dagger-pin into her own throat. And so strong was that self-induced hallucination of the avenging doll that we, forced by her into partial hypnosis, saw what she was seeing. Saw the doll move and writhe upward and pierce the dollmaker's throat. It is the only reasonable explanation. And it is well within the possibilities."

"And Braile?"

"A sliver of glass from the chandelier. I was in no condition after my return to make an examination. You know that."

"Gilmore?"

"Killed by his wife under the influence

of the cord. Don't forget I tried to murder you while under the influence of another of them."

He arose impatiently, then faced me.

"Dr. Lowell, I am of an old race that holds many ancient beliefs. Belief in evil spirits and good; belief in forces and powers that can, and do at times, make themselves manifest; conscious forces that can, and do, raise or ruin; beliefs in an immaterial, or if you will, a spiritual, world filled with entities as living as any creatures of this material world. You tell me that all material things must obey material laws. And that if there do exist immaterial beings, they cannot affect us either for good or evil because we, being material, can respond only to the laws of matter, which these, being immaterial, cannot command.

"I tell you that behind this curtain of the material—at which your vision halts—there are forces inimical to us—which God in his inscrutable wisdom permits to be. That these powers can, and do at times, reach through the veil of matter and become manifest in creatures like the dollmaker. It is so. Witches and sorcerers hand in hand with evil! It is so. And there are other powers friendly to us which make themselves manifest in their chosen.

"I say to you—Mme. Mandilip was an accursed witch! An instrument of these evil powers. Concubine of Satan! She burned as a witch should burn. She will burn in Hell—forever! I say to you that the little nurse was an instrument of the good powers. And she is happy today in Paradise—as she will be forever!"

He was silent, trembling with his own fervor. He touched my shoulder.

"Tell me, Dr. Lowell—tell me as truthfully as though you stood before the seat of God believing in Him as I believe—do those scientific explanations of yours satisfy you?"

I answered, very quietly:

"No, Ricori."

Nor do they.

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SERAPION

By Francis Stevens

The girl in the black veil could read souls and play with them like marionettes. Could her strange psychic powers solve the riddle of Serapion's other self?

Beyond the Pole

By PHILIP M. FISHER

YOU remember, of course, the days succeeding the armistice of November 11, 1918. You recall the treaty of Versailles, the covenant of the League of Nations. You cannot have forgotten the division among the allied nations of the war craft of the fallen empire, those left after that memorable night in Scapa Flow. You

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"Today I saw. . . . Faint outlines beyond the airship . . . moving forms of people . . . hundreds of them. . . ."

Into an accursed region of electrical horror—a freak of the cosmos unknown to mankind—the great airship drifted helplessly with a hapless crew

were proud of our large merchant ship, the Leviathan, once hailed as the Vaterland, Teutonia's greatest. You heard stories of Zeppelins—huge, threatening shadows of the upper air. Do you recall what was done with *them*, you sons and daughters of democracy?

This, then, is the history of one.

The Z 397 was completed in its home factory on the tenth of November, 1918. Its martial destiny was thwarted by signatures scrawled upon parchment on the succeeding day. What happened to it, then, this greatest of all aircraft, this cunningest of all ships of the sky? Was it sunk by a morale-broken crew in the salt water of a Scottish inlet? Was it burned in the great hangar that was its man-made womb? Was it passed over

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to a European foe? The government was silent, the newspapers were dumb.

There may have been reason for this. As to that I cannot say. Perhaps it was to sail in upon San Francisco, a surprise to the nation. Perhaps it was secretly taken over in order that no other of the Allies might suspect. Perhaps—and to this conjecture I strongly hold—the officials who made the turn already had inklings of a plan.

However it be, the Z 397, with a crew chosen from the air force of the United States Navy, sailed from Germany—across the bleak and saddened Russias—to the Far East. At the same time, under secret orders, there steamed from San Francisco, to the northwestward, a fat-bellied vessel. The two met—there are isles among the Aleutians whither no man goes but he who bears a secret word from Washington.

The ship of the sea tarried there for three months—long enough to see a temporary mooring built for the ship of the air. Then, bearing no news from the Far North, it returned to its home on the coast. The Z 397 remained, securely moored, behind the high cliffs of Aluakat Island—a secret prize. It wintered there, cared for through blizzard months by its doting, patriotic, but still uninformed and wondering crew.

In the spring the steamer sailed to Aluakat again—with supplies and sealed packets. In its hold was a precious cargo of the newest lifting force, compressed almost to liquidity in steel containers, sent to San Francisco by a dozen different routes, billed to half a hundred different consignees, governmental secrecy covering all—the element hailed with hope by men who love the air—the noninflammable gas; helium.

On May 6 of 1920, when the last retiring rage of spring had passed, the great aircraft, renamed the Rappahannock, took to the air and pointed her seven-hundred-foot cigar-shaped bulk for the north pole.

The position of Aluakat Island is approximately in latitude fifty-two north and longitude one hundred and seventy west. Meridians of longitude, as the reader knows, converge to meet at common points, the north and south poles. The Rappahannock navigated so as to follow that of one hundred and seventy west, driving rapidly northward.

A degree of latitude comprises sixty minutes—a minute of latitude is approximately one sea mile. The speed of the Rappahannock was set at sixty sea miles, or about sixty-nine land miles, per hour. Each hour, by radio, came information that the great ship, following the one hundred and seventieth meridian, had pushed northward one degree.

The latitude of Aluakat is fifty-two north, as has been stated. Thirty-eight degrees, then, left of the ninety between the equator and pole must be traversed to reach the northern cap of our planet. This, with all going as planned, would be accomplished in thirty-eight hours.

As hour after hour passed, and report after report came in, how I cursed the broken leg that at the last moment had prevented my going! How I longed to be with that pioneer crew of airmen in the frozen North! How bitterly I cursed my fate! Yet now how I shudder to think what I might have been, had not Providence been so kind!

Report after report—all going well. Engines in rhythmic harmony—navigation instruments smoothly recording—altitude easily held. Hour after hour—degree after degree! Ten hours more, and the pole would be theirs!

NINE hours—vast smooth blanket of white earth beneath, great crystal-clear vault of blue the sky overhead—no wind—all going well—better even than anticipated. How I cursed!

Eight hours more. Seven, six, five, four, three—

The radio operator broke in upon me, breathing hard. My broken leg had left me in charge.

"No report, sir! I've tried and tried for them—can't raise a sound."

That his face was rather white made no impression upon me. My own must have reached a paler hue.

"You've kept in touch with them?"

He nodded eagerly, his blue eyes bulging.

"Up to the last moment, sir. Then there was a minute with nothing coming in. Operator waiting for ship's position from the bridge, I thought. Been that way before each hourly report."

He threw out his hands hopelessly.

"I waited five minutes, sir; then I couldn't hold in longer. I tried for them—no answer. I tuned for their auxiliary radio, thinking the main outfit might have gone out on them—no answer. I switched back—no answer. This is terrible, sir!"

He leaned closer to me where I sat with my plastered leg on a board, and bulged those pale eyes into my very face.

"What has happened, sir?"

For a moment I was dizzy. My own brother, who had gone into the balloon division of our air service at the outset of the war, was commander of the Rappahannock.

All going well! For thirty-five degrees of the distance to the pole—all going well! Hope at its highest! Anticipation—success! Later, news to all the world— "Americans on secret trip win out!" And now, within three degrees—a short hundred and eighty miles—no report!

"Back!" I cried, raising myself with a mighty effort. "Back, and try again!"

I saw the man stare at me, tears on his cheeks. I dimly heard him say:

"Aye, aye, sir. My relief is—"

"Go! Have me carried—"

And then I must have wrenched my leg too severely, for I fainted dead away.

II

THE Rappahannock, as I have said, set full speed ahead at eight o'clock on that clear, calm morning of May 6, 1920. For thirty-four hours thereafter she sent us regular reports of her successful maintenance of speed and course. The pole was almost within her sight. Then, when more than twenty-one hundred miles of her voyage had been covered, when the thirty-fifth report should have come in, at seven o'clock of the evening of May 7th, there was none. There was nothing but silence.

All through the night—a night that was continuous twilight day in that northern post—we labored, exhorting all the gods of things electric to break through the silence and bring us hope.

They carried me to the radio room, that I might be forced to believe that all was being done that could be done. My own knowledge of radio was brought into play—and it was not little, for my brother and I had made special study of the subject.

Two long distance sets were in constant readiness in that little double-walled compartment. One and then the other, alternating, were brought into play. The three experts and myself took watch and watch at each set, that the personal factor might be eliminated and every chance made more secure. By midnight we still had caught no word from out the crystal air.

In that high latitude there was static, yes—it snapped and crashed and roared during the hours when we had kept continual touch, during the thirty-four hours when reports had steadily come in from the ever distancing ship. Static was expected, and our instruments were prepared for its elimination as far as possible.

I could comprehend now, with a mind beginning to feel the bitterness of our situation, why those who had planned this expedition from the very beginning had so carefully chosen the radio men accompanying the Rappahannock from its hangar in far-off Germany.

I could see now why John Grimes, professor of electricity of the Boston School of Technology, and his associate from the Edison Laboratories, Dr. Lawrence Hemphill, had been mysteriously added to our party before we set sail first, across the Russias and Siberia for the island of Aluakat in the Aleutians. The former was to join the airship's crew, the latter to remain at Aluakat. All had been carefully planned.

Electricity!

A strange, an incomprehensible force—in and of the earth, in and of interplanetary space, in and of the very universe! Electricity—call it magnetism, if you will, call it gravity or whatever else it may be—holding the very stars in their places, gripping the earth within its ninety-million-mile orbit about the sun, yet withholding the earth from the sun; staying the curious moon only two hundred and forty thousand miles from the earth itself; fastening each planet in our vast solar system in its station; holding the immeasurable cosmos to the fixed scheme of its tireless will.

Electricity—I do not say this in jest—which, while thus gripping the universe, will also imbue the limbs of a dead frog with the spasmodic semblance of life! It grips, it fascinates, it destroys life, cures life's ills, and it gives life. Is there any who can say that it is not life itself?

The earth itself a great magnet!

Did you know that half the navigation troubles of a ship at sea are due to this terrestrial magnetism? Did you know that even the direction in which the keel of a vessel is laid on the ways will ever after have its effect upon the navigation of that ship in its life at sea?

Lines of magnetic force run generally north and south upon or within this earth of ours, converging at the so-called magnetic poles, which only approximate the true poles—the ends of the axis on which the earth revolves. Did you know that if that ship's keel be so laid that her bow points north, then ever after will the bow of that ship be imbued with north magnetism, and the ship's compass ever after will be affected by such innate magnetism, and will have to be compensated therefor?

It is strange—it is true. It may be—can we deny it who only see electricity's effect, and not its reason or its ultimate conception?—it may be life, the vital force itself.

Ah, I can see many things now that I did not see then in that eerie chamber housing our radio on Aluakat Island! Many, many things, strange, fascinating, and—yes, horrible! From the point of view of normal things, as we see them and feel them and understand them—horrible! My brother—

TO THE extent of our knowledge and our powers, we fought, Dr. Hemphill, the three radio experts, and I—we fought for a word from space.

A week passed, and we had none.

The Rappahannock herself carried three radio sets—two identical with our own pair, and a small auxiliary outfit for short distance work, to be used in conjunction with the little portables when once the great airship should have settled to the level fields of polar ice, and ground observation would be the order of the day. Was it conceivable that both of the two main sets she carried should "go out" at the same time? To us—then—it was not.

Why, then, no reply? Why, then, no report?

By code we radioed San Francisco. The secret message of disaster was relayed on to Washington. In thirty-six hours we had a reply:

"Wait."

We waited—and labored in vain.

Another month passed, and another, and another—six, with winter again in Aluakat.

The expedition of the Rappahannock had been planned and prepared in secret. The government dared not tell the public what had happened. Relief must also be sent in secret.

In the spring of 1921 the steamer returned to Aluakat. It brought supplies, sealed orders, two crated planes, and men to fly.

A year had passed since the Rappahannock had vanished into the northern blue—a year of dying hope and increasing dread.

I was to be in charge of the relief—or, rather, of the search.

The steamer took us at once to Nome. Another month passed; and when news came that the ice had broken farther north, we sailed again. We went through Bering Strait, past Cape Lisburne, Icy Cape, and Point Barrow. Beyond this, sailing eastward, we came upon a tiny harbor, south of which stretched a level tundra land.

We landed, assembled the planes, and sailed in these over the Arctic Ocean, steering to the north and west, planning to cut the one hundred and seventieth meridan and to follow it as near the pole as possible. There it was that we reckoned the Rappahannock—what might be left of it, after the blizzards of polar winter—would be found.

III

WE SAILED low, seeming to skim the ice. We discovered level fields of blinding ice; and after about four hours' steady flight to the northwestward, we landed. We built a hut of oiled silk banked with blocks of snow, as a temporary base, and stored in it part of our supplies.

Of the eight men in our party, two staved at the base to care for the planes. The other six divided into groups of two, and, carrying condensed food and compasses, scattered north, east, and west of the hut on search—one week. We returned with shaking heads.

We took to the air again and flew northward about the same distance—four hours' drive through clear, marrow-chilling polar sky. We discovered a landing level again; built another hut; searched to north, to west, and to east again—another week. In vain!

We would have gone on toward the north, but for our meager supplies—in particular, the shortage of fuel for the planes. We took again to the latter, sailed south in great horizontal loops, ever staring down upon the glaring fields of white—staring until, in the frigidity of the arctic air, our very eyeballs glazed with frost.

We left a message in the second hut before we left it, as already we had left

one in the first. We would return, we said. Any survivors—for the Rappahannock had carried food sufficient for several months—must follow south, directly south. We would come again and would endeavor to aid them.

Turning back, we sailed about a hundred miles south of our first hut. Constantly, of course, we were on the lookout for the wreck of the Rappahannock, or for any traces of it that might remain. We took it for granted that the airship had been wrecked. Of that other and more horrible thing we then had no hint.

The imagination of man, inherited through the ages, has no conception of possibilities that former man, throughout those ages, has not experienced. The Rappahannock must have been *wrecked*. What else? Her gas might have failed for some reason. She might have landed, and no lives lost; but now, after the winter, she would no doubt be a wreck.

We landed—and it must be our last venture on the ice, for our fuel was precariously low. We built the usual hut. We searched to the west and to the east—the south we would follow until we saw the open sea.

And then it was that Sergeant Harrow and I came upon the message.

It was a dark spot on the white of the tumbled pack. I remember that the sergeant's sudden grip on my arm startled me, thrilled me with quick fear. Why fear, I cannot say; yet such, or premonition, it was.

I turned and followed his tremblingly raised directing arm.

"There's something!" The fear gripped colder. "A—a body?"

We stumbled to it over the glaring white, and stared for a moment before touching it.

It was not a body. It appeared to have been a cylinder of some sort. I can recall the trivial comparison that flashed through my mind as I gazed upon it, lying lonely and blackish brown upon the hard-packed snow. It was the size of the two-and-a-half-pound coffee tins heaped behind the cook shack back there on Aluakat; but it had been flattened, as if by a heavy blow.

Sergeant Harrow suddenly bent and picked it up. He held it toward me for closer inspection. I took it—then glanced up in quick wonder as I heard the sergeant suddenly grunt. He was holding his fur-gloved hands out before him, staring.

His palms were smutted with black.

I took my own left hand from the thing. My palm, also, was blackened. I stared into the desolate white waste that stretched about us on all sides. The sergeant caught my thought.

"No, no—that's all! There's nothing else."

I remember the quick white puffs from his lips, betraying his excitement. I dropped my eyes to the thing I held, and rubbed it with my gloved thumb.

"Charred! It's charred!" Harrow nodded without reply. "It's charred—burned—"

He nodded again, his eyes wider.

"Rubber?" he muttered, as in questioning conjecture.

I raised the thing to my nose. What odor there might once have been had long since gone.

Our minds cleared suddenly. We examined it.

We tapped it, and it gave forth a hollow sound. Cutting the charred surface, we discovered that it was indeed covered with hard rubber. In one unburned space of about half an inch square there was a slightly raised rib. Both of us had dallied with things electric. The rib gave to both the same thought, simultaneously ejaculated.

"Like storage battery separators!"

We cut deeper. The outer surface peeled away in hard and brittle scales, like slate. Beneath it was another surface of hard rubber, unquestionably showing the ribbed surface of the hard rubber separators used between the lead plates of the type of storage battery carried on the Rappahannock. Our eyes met again.

We cut deeper, and the knife blade scratched on metal. Haste, then, and bright tinned surface gleamed through the black. Five minutes more, and we had the entire tin cleaned. Smashed almost flat it was, indeed, but undoubtedly one of the coffee cans which sailed with the Rappahannock on the 6th of May, 1920, more than a year before.

The ship could carry such comparative luxuries as coffee. Two weeks' of cruising about the pole with six months' full supply meant nothing to its seven-hundred-foot length, its millions of cubic feet of lifting helium gas. Here was one of the tins, carefully covered with hard rubber plates welded into an air-tight, waterproof casing. It was battered out of shape, and the outer surface of the rubber was—charred!

AGAIN I stared about me. Again Sergeant Harrow shook his head, his black eyes looking wonderingly into mine.

"Nothing – nothing else, lieutenant. Nothing—only this!" He paused for a moment, with a quick intake of breath. "And —and it's—"

Something in his voice brought my eyes to his again.

"It's what?"

His eyes dropped to the palms of his gloves.

"It's *charred!*"

"Yes," I repeated dully. "Charred the rubber is—burned. Why?"

"God knows, sir," he cried huskily. "It's charred, but there's no other wreckage about us here. The rubber was burned, but nothing else about. It's smashed—"

"As if it had fallen from—"

"From a great height, lieutenant; but" —he waved his furred arm about us—"but where are the burned parts of the rest of 'em, sir? If the Rappahannock caught fire—"

"Helium gas won't burn, Harrow."

"Gasoline, then. If it caught fire—aluminum won't burn, the engines won't burn, and bo—"

He stopped suddenly, and dropped his eyes. I knew his thought then, too. Sergeant Harrow and I were too old friends in the service to mince matters, even in such a case as this. I shook my head. My brother, with the Rappahannock, had been gone a year.

"You were going to say that bones don't burn, Jim!"

His eyes burned steadily on mine.

"And yet the covering of that can was burned, and there's nothing else about."

"I'll open it!" I cried.

The tin was soft to the steel of my sheath knife, and I cut a flap in its side. I tore off one glove, regardless of the biting frost in the air, and tugged at the grayish white stuff within. It came out in fibrous chunks.

"Asbestos! They had spare stuff for the engines!"

I looked up at Harrow, and met the question in his eye.

"If it's asbestos, then it was put in here to protect what's beneath it from heat. It was deliberately packed so, as a protection from *heat*—in this frozen world. Did they—what did they—know?"

"Pull it out, old man—pull it out!"

I did. Beneath what must have been, before the can was flattened in its fall, three inches of solid asbestos packing, I finally came upon an inch-thick, half-foot-long black cylinder, of the same hard rubber that had been about the container itself.

"It's a message! A message from—"

I could feel the sergeant's warm breath on my cheek. A message! My brother!

The rubber was tougher than that which had protected the main receptacle, but I cut it through and tore it apart. Within it was a tightly rolled cylinder of paper. There was handwriting on the outside of this—and with a sinking sensation, and yet one also of jubilance and pride, I recognized it. For a moment, then, the frost-white scene was black.

"From them, man? From *them*?"

"My brother's handwriting," I said.

Reverently I opened that message from an unknown space. Within the first wrapping was a note, addressed to me. I read it aloud:

"Dear Steve:

"I cannot see the paper now, nor my pencil, so must be brief. Our situation is awful—read and see, but *do not* let the government make another trial like this. See that the families of those who sailed with us are cared for—the government owes us that; but do *not* try to help *us*. We are done. My love to all.

"I must hurry and seal this as best I can. I pray it will be found before another similar attempt is made. Good-by, Steve.

"Bill."

The sergeant and I looked into each other's eyes. Then I, whose heart was pounding savagely, stared up into the empty blue of the polar sky.

"There's something else," I said, and my voice seemed far away. "Something else—a date."

"A date?"

I nodded, and showed him. Terror leaped into his eyes. He bent down, threw up one arm, and from beneath it peered, as I had, at the empty blue vault above.

The Rappahannock had been gone for more than a year; yet the date on the message my brother had sent was July 7 of the present year—and today was but the 12th. It had been penciled but five days before. It had been dropped—yet the vault above was empty, clear.

And then we read what is reprinted in the following chapters.

IV

LOG of the United States Rigid Dirigible Aircraft Rappahannock, Scientific Exploration Expedition in the Northern Polar Regions, 1920-1921, as condensed by Captain William R. Sheldon, Aviation Service, United States Navy, commanding.

More than a year has now elapsed since we sailed from the island of Aluakat, on May 6, 1920. In that year many strange and inexplicable things have occurred, many incidents of almost unimaginable horror have taken place. In that year we have tried with all the inventive genius within our power to communicate with the world that we know.

During the first weeks, this effort was actuated mainly by the desire for rescue, we being but human beings whom fate had imbued with the love of kind and the love of life. During the last seven months, still remaining human beings of a sort, assuredly yet holding to that love of kind and that love of life as once we knew it, our endeavor to send a message found its motive in another and now even stronger desire—to give warning.

Both types of message have been written and dispatched, but as we could see with our own eyes, they have failed to reach even the first post in the direction of their hoped-for destination. That failure has served to double our mental agony. We are in constant fear that others will follow us toward whatever horrible destiny fate has directed our own way. We have tasted of that destiny—or, at least, of the pathway leading to whatever it ultimately may be, and we shudder for those others who still are, as once we were, normal men.

This message, I cannot help but believe, will be our last. God grant that it may reach mankind before other men make such an attempt as this!

We sailed, as I have said, on May 6, 1920, secretly, in this great aircraft taken secretly, too, from Germany in the days following the world war. We were thirty-four men in all. We had been thirty-five had not my brother, who would have been my second in command, met with a mishap in which I now know that fate was kind to him.

We carried sufficient fuel to carry us half way about the earth—double the amount we reckoned necessary to meet all the hazards of such a journey. We had food in plenty—sufficient to carry us through the following winter, did some accident bring us to earth and catch us inextricably in the polar ice. We carried duplicate sets of all modern instruments pertaining to aerial navigation. We carried duplicate sets of radio, duplicate parts of the more delicate appurtenances to our engines.

The personnel of the crew, too, was in duplicate. There were two men skilled in each of the crafts and sciences pertaining to the work of driving and navigating the ship, and to the gathering of such data as might be of scientific interest. In a word, our dirigible constituted a little world of the air, as does a ship a little world on the sea. We planned to be gone from Aluakat one month, but we were ready and equipped if that one were prolonged to six, or even to a possible eight.

As the first hours sped by, we were jubilant. All was going superlatively well. We would be the first men to navigate to the north pole through the unknown air!

Hour after hour we rushed on, following the one hundred and seventieth meridian straight for the true north. Instruments indicated each hour the passage of sixty nautical miles. The mathematics of our navigation agreed; each hour one full degree farther north. Our elation increased—we would be the first airmen at the pole!

In radio code we and Aluakat were in constant touch. The staff there—including my brother—sent us continual congratulations. I knew the bitterness that must be in his heart because he was not with us, and I was sorry for him—sorry!

A full day passed—still on we sped, hour after hour. Excitement was pounding within me. It was vibrant in the entire ship. By ten o'clock that night—it scarce can be called night—we would be there, hovering over the apex of the earth—the first men to reach it, and to view it, from the air!

The following is an extract from the ship's log, as entered by Lieutenant Harper, during the six to eight o'clock dog watch, May 7, 1920:

7.32—Ship's compass swinging wildly. Notified captain, navigator, and Professor Grimes. The former two went to observation bridge for

bearings and altitudes of what stars could dimly be seen. The professor came to the steering room to observe the compass.

7.38—Navigator phoned down from the observation platform, requesting check of topside compass and steering compass. I gave average direction of still violently swinging compass card, and navigator directed by what average course we should hold.

7:56—Weather calm, ship riding smoothly and on level keel, yet compass card trembles violently, at times bobbing up and down spasmodically in a vertical plane. Captain, navigator, and Professor Grimes making tests in steering room. All else going well. Have notified radio room to be ready to send out eight o'clock report to Aluakat.

AS YOU can see, at four minutes to eight on the second day of our trip we were ready to send the thirty-fifth report that all was going well. It was destined never to be dispatched.

When Lieutenant Harper first sent word to me that the steering compass was behaving strangely, I proceeded with Lieutenant Parke to the observation bridge at the forward end of the narrow running platform atop the great cigar-shaped gas bag of our dirigible. We had expected peculiar electrical phenomena in this region, and were neither greatly surprised nor unduly excited.

Professor Grimes proceeded to the steering room for observation, as you have noted. On the observation bridge Lieutenant Parke and I took the usual altitudes and azimuths of stars, and computed what average course the wheelsman was to follow, phoning down orders to that effect. There was a slight difficulty reaching Lieutenant Harper by phone, but of this we thought nothing at the time.

Following this we proceeded, through the electric-lighted interior passage within the balloon itself, to the steering room. I recall well that the lights burned yellowly, and not with their accustomed brilliance; but of this, also, we made no remark.

We arrived and found the professor jotting down notes regarding the action of the compass, and testing other electric apparatus near by. We held a short consultation, and agreed that the erratic behavior of the compass was to be expected in this latitude. We attributed the bobbing of the compass card in its bowl of alcohol and water to the passage of a terrestrial magnetic wave impulse more powerful than we had yet experienced.

Even as we watched, however, its agitation became still more spasmodic and violent. The ship maintained an even keel, yet the card to which the compass magnets are attached might have been suspended in air rather than in the liquid that normally gave it stability. This, however, gave no reason for apprehension; and when Lieutenant Harper asked permission to send the eight o'clock position report to Aluakat, I read his message and nodded.

"The thirty-fifth," I remember remarking. "Good!"

He went to the phone and signaled for the radio room. Parke, the professor, and myself bent again over the compass. It was then that I heard Harper call to one of his watch:

"Take this to the radio room. Send at once. After getting O.K. on it, tell Jenkins to come to the bridge."

I turned about. Jenkins was one of the repair electricians.

"Something gone wrong, Harper?"

He nodded—yet rather casually.

"Phone, sir. Have a man on it at once." He stepped up to me and saluted. "Eight o'clock, sir. All departments reported secure—"

And in the midst of this usual eight o'clock report to the commanding officer of the ship, he suddenly stopped, his eyes flitting to the compass.

"What's the matter?" I demanded in wonder.

"The light in the binnacle's gone out, captain."

He pointed. The binnacle hood had been replaced over the compass bowl only a moment before, and the tiny globe had shed its light over the compass card. The steersman was peering down upon it, his brows wrinkled perplexedly. He glanced up as I stepped to his side.

"It's stopped jiggling, sir."

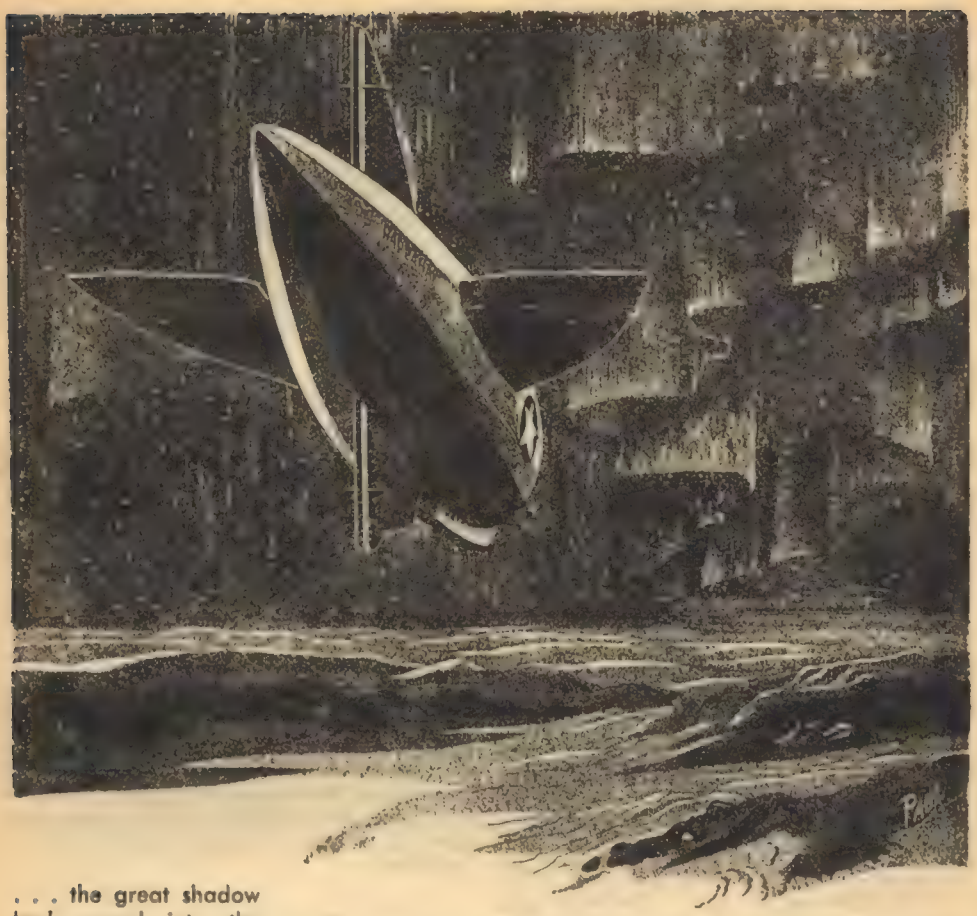
Somewhat relieved, I nodded to Harper.

"Get Jenkins after it, too." I turned to the professor. "The wave has passed, eh, and the compass settled again?"

He also looked intently at it.

"It has, captain. It is quiet—quiet—very quiet!"

Something in his voice aroused my curiosity. I peered over his shoulder at it again. His next words were spoken in a low tone.



. . . the great shadow had moved into the Northern blue . . . since then her fate was shrouded in tragic silence. . . .

"Very quiet, captain—almost as if it had gone dead!"

I raised my head, listening. Some sound—some lack of sound—something different. One becomes used to a ship's hum of life. I shook myself and peered again at the compass.

"Dead?"

The card was quiet in its bowl. I found myself chuckling at the professor's voice.

"If it stays as dead as that, we'll have no more trouble with—"

I stopped short again, and stiffened, erect, listening. Something—what?

It was then that a mechanic burst into the steering room, his face rather white.

"Captain here?" He saw me, and with a quick gasp, as of relief, saluted and cried: "Report from engineer, sir. All engines stopped—stopped, captain!"

"Stopped?"

He peered into my face, seeming utterly oblivious of the others. He stepped closer and put out one hand, as if to grasp my arm. He snapped his fingers.

"Like that, captain! All at once all six of 'em just died down—and we can't get 'em started again!"

"All six engines?"

I cocked up my head once more. That was it—the sound of them was missing!

"Not all?"

"All six, sir—like that!"

I whipped about to Harper.

"Record time, position, elevation. Get a bearing below, and check our drift."

I started for the door—and a man crashed into me. Staggering back from the impact, I saw that it was the messenger whom the officer of the deck had sent to

the radio room. He went red, then white.

"Excuse me, sir, I—captain, Barlow can't get Aluakat! Can't get even a spark out of his apparatus, sir—not a spark. He told me to report to you, sir."

V

EXTRACT from the Rappahannock's log, mid watch, May 8, 1920:

All electric apparatus on board ship useless. All storage batteries dead. Magnet generators, part of cruising engines, will not give spark when motors are jacked over by hand. Captain, Professor Grimes, and all experts in electricity, working without cessation. No success at time of writing, 3.45.

Weather clear, zero wind, compartments very cold, as engine exhaust heating is gone, and electric radiators useless. Ship drifting at rate of approximately one-half mile per hour in northerly direction. At time of breakdown ship was holding cruising elevation of two thousand feet. This has increased to three thousand four hundred in the last eight hours—

In brief, this covered our situation. Electricity was vital to the ship, and it had failed in every method of generation. Spare storage batteries, filled with new solution, failed. A magneto generator, spare for the engines, was geared up and a hand crank devised. It also failed to generate a spark. This was a last test, almost a last resort.

Yet, even under such disappointment, there was no general sense of apprehension over the ship. Temporarily, our means of developing electric power had failed—just that and nothing more.

In a consultation of our experts, Professor Grimes declared that the situation must be caused by our passage through some terrestrial magnetic wave peculiar to the hitherto unexplored altitudes in the polar regions. Either that, or some such wave was even now passing through the atmosphere about us. He cited the aurora borealis as a well known electrical phenomenon of the polar regions that seems to come and go almost with direction or will.

He waved his hand in conclusion.

"A passing obstacle," he declared. "An hour more, perhaps a day, a week—and all will be well again."

I recall Lieutenant Parke staring soberly through the closed port, moistening his lips and nodding.

"A week—"

Yet, as I say, we felt that the thing would pass. In general, we saw no cause for fear.

The cold was intense, of course, and we had risen some fourteen hundred feet in altitude without known cause but neither of these two developments merited special remark then. I set them down here for reasons that will be appreciated later.

Our slight drift to the northward, too, gave little cause for comment. When the engines failed, we were proceeding at the rate of sixty miles an hour. The atmosphere was absolutely motionless, and a certain residuum of our momentum would account for the forward drift.

Despite failure thus far, we continued our efforts. Above all, we desired to communicate with Aluakat. This was not disaster, and we wished the minds of those left behind to be at peace.

EXTRACT from ship's log, afternoon watch, May 15, 1920:

Ship at rest at an altitude of 14,627 feet. Approximate position, 169 west longitude, 96 north latitude, indicating a drift to south and east of position where engines failed, and a rise in altitude of 12,627 feet. Electrical experts working in shifts to generate current. Cold not so intense. Atmosphere quiet—zero wind. Crew cheerful. Plenty of food. General spirit of optimism.

A week since the last extract, you see, and still we had courage and hope.

One reason for this lay, I think, in the fact that the men chosen from the hardy group that fetched the Rappahannock across the northern barrens of the Asiatic continent before we made our first landing in Aluakat were themselves the very hardiest. All fetched to that hidden Aleutian harborage were as superlatively qualified physically for such an undertaking as were they superlatively mentally equipped; and for the polar cruise itself we chose the best of them all.

Strong blood and clear thinking ever beget the ability to endure those hardships that are far worse than mere physical ones—hardships of the spirit. We were, to a man, not only hopeful but confident—and filled, too, with the zest of adventure in the unknown.

Professor Grimes, of us all, might have been called a slight man. In age he led the oldest of us by twenty years. He was thin

to the point of meagerness. He was gray. Yet, give him a mental task to perform, and the driving force of his gigantic will was backed by a body that seemed not to know fatigue. During the first two days of our plight he did not sleep for forty-eight hours. He superintended every technical job and continually suggested new ones.

Lieutenant Parke, my mate and navigator, was the professor's physical opposite. Topping my own lean six feet by two full inches, he was pink-skinned, torsoed like a bull, eyed like a hawk, nosed like a Roman emperor. During the war he had downed eight German planes in single-handed duels of the air, and he had invented a stabilizing device for heavier-than-air machines that meant a new era in aerial navigation; yet he could not stand continuous effort as could Professor Grimes.

I mention only these two at this moment. I might add two others who have been with me almost to the last.

One was Barlow, the chief radio electrician, who had been on watch when first we failed to signal Aluakat. He was a heavy-set man with black eyes deep under low-drawn and still blacker brows, swarthy to the point of a desert dweller, wide-jawed as a prize fighter. He was keen for experiment, sure in analysis of things pertaining to his craft, steady, unexcitable, indomitable—and, perhaps strangely, as kind and as true as a Lincoln.

The other was Leclerc, photographer of the expedition. Again an opposite—rat-like, hunch-shouldered, with dull hair the color of a rat, and thin yellow face. His slightly bulbous washed blue eyes seemed ever on the watch, yet ever unseeing. He always wore stained clothing, and he had stained finger nails which, when not in his dark room or aiming a camera, he constantly chewed.

Leclerc was enthusiastic, as an artist should be, and cynical of all things but his craft. He supported a crippled father, a present wife, a divorced wife, and her three children, by the earnings of his camera. A mean man, by all appearances—yet we loved him, for beneath the crust was something else.

"I am seek of doing nozzing on t'ees sheep, captain," he said to me the first day. "Put me to work!"

These are but examples of our human material. As the log says, there was no doubt about it—"general spirit of optimism." But one thing gave us cause for serious apprehension—our steadily increasing altitude.

ACCORDING to the manufacturers, the Z 397, loaded to capacity, as it had been when we left Aluakat, could reach a maximum elevation above sea level of twelve thousand feet. On this, the eighth day, we had nearly three thousand feet above this maximum, and still were slowly rising. This, any more than the disturbance of our electric plants, we could not understand.

The indefatigable professor suggested that it might be caused by currents of air slowly circulating about the poles—the axis of the earth—and lifting us with them.

Parke's eagle nose lifted. He objected, on the ground that we had made but little horizontal drift—perhaps, in all, twelve miles.

The professor returned that these currents might simply exercise a vertical force upon our cigar-shaped balloon, or that our elevating rudders might act like the stretched wings of a condor, so that, still hovering over approximately the same spot on the surface of the earth below, we were gradually lifted to greater heights.

We nodded vaguely at this, I know. The essential thing was to get the engines going; then we might descend as we willed.

EXTRACT from Rappahannock's log, June 1, 1920:

Ship at an altitude of 26,800 feet—still rising. Position, determined by star sight, approximately as of 8 P.M. of May 7, 1920. Daily attempts to bring electrical equipment to function still unsuccessful. Food is plenty. Water on diminishing rations. Helpful spirit among personnel, but hope of proceeding to the pole rapidly going.

Terse comments, these, but pointed in their brevity.

Some of us still clung to hope, but it was to a dim hope, and a fast vanishing one.

Three weeks passed, and our situation was at last openly admitted to be precarious. Whatever was the phenomenon that had rendered useless all electric apparatus on board the ship, it had not passed, as Professor Grimes declared it must, and as we all thought it would. We were helpless. We were sailors of the air marooned at a

high altitude, beyond all present aid from mankind on the earth below.

Does this sound incredible to your ears, knowing how easy it is for a balloonist to reach the ground beneath? As easy, surely, as for plummet to fall when cast from on high!

We had worked hard. We had put all the mental genius at our command to the task—and further attempt in one direction, at least, we dared not hazard.

At the end of the second week we began to cast about, not so much now to resuscitate our dormant motive power, as to reach the dim white surface beneath us that we knew to be the earth. To this end we opened the valves and emptied six of the thirty separate balloon compartments of their contents—the precious lifting element, the helium gas.

Our altitude at this time was somewhat over twenty thousand feet, and under normal conditions we should have dropped quickly to the ten-thousand-foot level and then sunk slowly to the surface of the earth. We did, however, no such thing. If anything occurred, it was the opposite. We continued slowly *to rise*.

Our instruments showed the atmosphere at this level to be highly rarefied, and far less dense than that of the twelve-thousand-foot level—the maximum elevation to which the ship, according to its designers' theory, could reach with all its gas compartments inflated, and with its storage spaces, living quarters, and fuel tanks loaded to maximum carrying capacity. With one-fifth of the lifting element released, and still under practically maximum load, we continued to ascend.

The suggestion that we should open more helium compartments we dared not adopt. We had released too much gas as it was, declared Professor Grimes.

We had given up the theory of sustaining air currents. There was something, the professor stoutly held, in the magnetic properties of the atmosphere, that was preventing descent, as it had already neutralized our electric generation. We all hoped, he repeated, that this condition was but temporary.

"Suppose we release more helium," he cried, waving one thin hand, as he rumpled his scanty gray locks with the other. "Suppose we release more of the gas which under normal conditions keeps us in the air. Then suppose this strange condition ceases. What then?"

Lieutenant Parke's gray eyes glittered. He projected one fur-mitted hand, the thumb stiffly pointed down.

"The ice," he said.

The professor nodded with almost savage certainty.

"We would fall like a rock!"

We dared not risk further release of helium—dared not while there was the slightest gleam of hope remaining. If we had—ah, perhaps the swift downward rush and the final quick death leaping up with the earth below us had been better! But of that, who then could know? Besides, as I have said, we still retained hope, were it ever so slight.

We gave up the idea of sinking earthward, and renewed our attempts to generate electricity, that we might go forward. Still in vain!

Food was plentiful; and despite the chill in this highly rarefied polar atmosphere, we developed no cases of frostbite. We found furs a necessity, yes; but when toiling with our instruments and machinery, no harm came to bare hands. And we discovered more and more that we needed but little food to retain our bodily strength, to maintain our bodily heat at normal.

Something high-spirited, too, there seemed to be in the quality of the air we breathed. We were alert, almost intensely so, in mind and body. We did not tire easily. We slept but little, yet awoke mightily refreshed.

At the time we attributed this condition to the effect of our situation—I mean not the physical one, but the mental—upon our nervous systems. Now, of course, we know differently—or think we know differently. I believe, indeed, that had we then known what speedily was to develop, even the most iron-willed of our marooned group would have rushed for the valves and emptied out the last vestige of helium, or, that failing, would have cast himself over the side.

VI

EXTRACT from log of the Rappahannock, October 6, 1920, forenoon watch, as entered by Lieutenant Harper:

Conditions as before. Still slowly rising—altitude 59,500 feet, approximately. At 10.40 Davis, ship's cook, second class, reported to me that

some one was playing tricks on him. When questioned, his replies were vague. His fear undoubtedly was not. He declared that if such action on part of his mates was continued he would jump off the ship.

I reported at once to the captain. Davis promised to go to him before taking such final action, and all hands declared they played no tricks. We wonder if this is a sign of coming mental deterioration. Davis still insists that his shipmates had been hoaxing him.

Five months have passed since we started from Aluakat, happy and enthusiastic and confident of speedy success. Five months! And before us, perhaps God only knows—an eternity.

We are practically motionless up here as far as horizontal progress is concerned; but we rise steadily, as if our ship is slowly being pushed upward by some persistent and pitiless satanic spirit. As I put down these notes, the Rappahannock is lying on an even keel, without sense of motion, at the undreamed altitude of sixty thousand feet above the surface of the earth—or nearly *twelve miles!*

FROM this point on, my comments upon extracts from the log are taken verbatim from my private diary written the same day or that following. My purpose in sending this message to men on earth being twofold—simple relation of our situation, and also a warning against any similar attempt to reach the pole through the higher altitudes—I believe this method of procedure will have the stronger deterrent effect that I with all my heart desire.

It was at this date, too, that the real horror of our predicament began rapidly to develop.

TWELVE miles—and so alone, so utterly beyond all help or remedy! In the last two months we have not seen the earth. The white fields below us have merged into nothingness with the dim horizon itself, and we are but the insignificant center of a vast pale blue sphere.

The sun is daily showing its pale disk lower and lower, and it is only by sight of it, and of the paler stars above us, that we know that our keel is still held earthward by whatever residual force of gravity is yet acting upon it. The sun and the few stars seem nearer to us than the earth itself. We sometimes start at discovering ourselves staring, almost in mental vacuum, out upon them.

The moon, nearest of all other cosmic bodies to the earth we once knew, is our greatest friend. We know every cratered lineament of Luna's face as we never knew it before. Sight of her rising to the south and east—we know it must be south and east, though our compasses are as worthless as on that first day months ago—is all, I imagine, that keeps us sane, paradoxical though it may seem.

By day we are the tiny center of a vast sphere, stretching into pale blue infinities of space up, down, to right, to left, to the front, to the rear. The Rappahannock is alone in this space, and we, her crew, are marooned with her.

There is no wind. There is but little atmosphere at all at this height.

By all accepted ideas, we should long ago have been dead from lack of oxygen, we should have been frozen stiff with cold. Long since, too, should we have died in torment from lack of water; yet, strangely, we live. Not only do we live, but we still retain our strength and bodily comfort.

For a month now no water has passed my lips; yet today, physically, I feel no less fit than when last I drank. In all truth, I feel better than ever I felt before in my life on earth. Every fiber of me, day and night—we do not sleep now, seeming not to require it, though Heaven knows the boon of unconsciousness would be welcomed with all our hearts—every fiber, I say, thrills with an almost damnable sense of exhilaration.

I feel no lack of air, I feel nothing of the cold that our thermometers, long since at their minimum level, persistently point out to be with us. I do not feel the need of water, or even of food. Bodily, I seem in the prime of health and strength and endurance—devilishly so; and it is thus with every other man on the ship, even Professor Grimes.

Mentally—there may be a difference.

FIVE months have elapsed since we sailed from Aluakat on the 6th of May. The last four have been passed in the dead monotony of hopelessness.

For some time we dropped a small parachute daily suspending messages. We have cause, now, to doubt whether they ever fell to earth.

We developed a daily routine. We have kept up, simply for lack of real action, our

regular schedule of watches, but with this change—each watch has been cut down from four hours to two. This was done in order to break the monotony of our ceaseless awakeness, if I may use the word. Our several departments have been consolidated into three—navigation, engineering, and scientific.

In the first group are Lieutenants Harper, Parke, Leavitt, and myself, with the three quartermasters. In each two-hour watch we visit the steering room and the observation platform atop the ship, where we take what astronomical sights we may. Then we take a course throughout the entire ship and back to the steering room again, where we await relief.

In the engineering department are Lieutenant Bristow, the engineer, his assistant, Warrant Machinist Willis—expert in the new Hermaphrodite Diesel engines—and the twelve machinists' mates, who were formerly assigned in pairs to each of the six motor units.

In the scientific group, headed by Professor Grimes, are the radio experts, the four electricians; Leclerc, the photographer; Mr. Jones, the meteorologist, and Davis the cook.

The three petty officers, who complete our total personnel of thirty-four, are held as a relief and emergency group. It is their calling to duty here and there on the ship that most helps us of the navigation department to pass the time and break the dull monotony of trying to do something when there is nothing to do.

The cook, at his own request—and because, too, navy cooks are at best temperamental—was placed with the scientists, as you may note. As far as cooking was concerned, there was practically nothing for him to do.

Thus we lived—still lived, if living it can be called. At regular intervals, between our watches, we lie down—from habit, and because we have strictly enforced the rule; for we finally have come, as I said to the point where we cannot embrace, and seem not to require the divine dispensation of sleep.

Every watch each engine is jacked over two complete revolutions, all oil drips and grease cups are examined, all bright work on exposed parts is rubbed down. During each watch the scientific department attempts to restore current, attempts to start the radio. Each change of watch, we have hitherto hoped, would bring the hoped-for release from this strange condition; but as I have said, though bodily alert and well, we have suffered a mental change. Hope has fled!

Perhaps it was this that first affected the cook, Davis. Perhaps he had already been touched by—something, we know not yet what, only believing that it is something hitherto unknown to normal men in normal environments.

As stated in the log, he came to Lieutenant Harper complaining that some one was playing tricks on him. This happened today, during the second morning watch.

His anger was so genuine, his sense of outrage so intense, that Harper at once sent him to me in my quarters abaft the steering room. I asked him in what way he had been tricked. He stared about him for a moment, as if he feared another presence in the narrow space; then he turned to me, wide-eyed. Hesitatingly he took a pad of paper and a pencil from my desk, and wrote:

"Behind my back, sir. Touching me on the cheek, like—on the ear, maybe. When I turns back, they're at work again. It ain't right, captain, playing tricks like that when you're up here this way. It ain't right, sir!"

"Did you ask them if they had touched you?" I replied, also penciling my words on the pad of paper.

"I did, sir. They denies it; but something touched me, and they was the only men about."

"How far away from you were they when you felt the touch?"

"About five feet."

"Did you turn at once?"

"At first I just kind of brushed it away, sir; but after that I got mad and turned on them. They was back at work again—like that!"

He returned the pad and snapped his fingers.

YOU wonder, perhaps, why we used paper and pencil in talking to one another thus. You forget our altitude—all but sixty thousand feet. At that height there is barely enough air to carry sound.

A month ago we could hear only by placing the mouth to the ear, and literally yelling and this became not only disagreeable, but irksome. Now all sound has ceased. Fortunately, we have plenty of note paper with

Before we could stop him Davis whipped away from us—vaulted over the side into space

us, not only for navigational purposes, but for scientific notes. Each group chief carries a pad and pencil.

I examined Davis's face gravely, but with a sort of apprehensive curiosity. Was our extraordinary manner of life at last beginning to tell? Was this the first sign of madness?

I decided that it was not. The man's eyes, though holding anger, showed nothing of mental decay. He had probably been hoaxed by his thoughtless mates. It must stop.

I so assured him, and set out to inform the rest of the crew that no practical jokes might be indulged in. The practice would surely lead to danger.

It was later that Lieutenant Bristow, the engineer, came to me.

"I talked to the group who were working with Davis, captain, and they still deny having touched him. They seemed surprised that I doubted them. They said that as far as they were concerned, they'd throw overboard any man who tried practical jokes up here. It looks to me as if Davis had been dreaming."

I nodded, but the incident set me to thinking.

When Davis came again later in the afternoon, with a similar complaint, I held him there and called in Professor Grimes. The professor questioned him; and after getting his promise to do nothing rash, I sent him away.

Then I turned to Professor Grimes.

One week before, as Parke and I were on the observation platform, I had been suddenly startled by my companion's quick, tight grip on my arm. His lips moved, and he pointed down the long narrow runway toward the stern. Then I felt a tingling run over my body.

Perhaps two hundred feet away, and slowly running toward us, was a spherical luminous object about the size of a basket ball. In the dim light it was bluish white, not unlike the phosphorescence of a tropic sea.

It rolled, as I say, very slowly in our direction, and it left in its wake a trail of the same living hue, which flickered and wavered almost as might flame. As it neared us, we could see that it was not perfectly round itself, but that its surface was in wraithlike motion, and tongued with flame-like stuff of the same bluish radiance.

We awaited its approach stiffly—I, for my part, in some trepidation. I guessed what it was, but feared it. Then, when almost upon us, as if it had suddenly turned fluid, it flattened upon the runway, pooled there for a full minute, as it spread to the edge of the narrow foot strips, hesitated, and then flowed with great deliberation over upon the skin of the ship—and vanished.

Parke turned to me, and his lips formed the word:

"Electricity!"

I nodded.

I did not feel entirely comfortable. The quiet about the ship has been so complete during the last months—so intense, as it were; and I did not fancy having things like that appear out of the quiet so entirely unheralded. It was uncanny—devilishly uncanny.

I mentioned this now to Professor Grimes. He nodded, and inquired—speaking to me with pad and pencil:

"Something like that touched Davis?"

I wrote two words, ending with a question mark:

"And—unseen?"

The professor's eyes raised to mine at that. Then he nodded again.

"We are strangely situated, and it would be unprecedented. The study of electricity is yet in its infancy. We know a few things it can do, but we do not yet know what it is or why it does them. What we do know of electricity applies only to normal conditions on our normal earth. We are some twelve miles above that normal—six miles higher than man has heretofore reached. We are as much explorers in an unknown world as was Livingstone in Africa. We are in a part of the polar region that no man has yet visited, and twelve miles above that region. Natural electrical phenomena seem peculiarly at their maximum in the polar regions known to man.

Who knows what strange manifestations of this unknown force we may not meet with up here? Something touched Davis. He could not see what it was. No other man saw what it was. You and Parke witnessed a fluid ball of electricity the other day—saw it. Who can say but that Davis was touched by something akin to it, and yet invisible?"

We left the matter thus; but I, at least, was wondering.

Sixty thousand feet above the pole in an aircraft which, following every known law of nature, should long since have drifted down to earth! In an aircraft supported by—as far as we could see—nothing; living without food, without water, without sleep, yet entirely comfortable in body, extremely alert in both body and mind! High in space, in a temperature below anything that our spirit thermometers could measure, yet going about our duties in ordinary uniforms and nothing else! Atmosphere so lacking in the stuff we breathe that it cannot carry sound—and yet suffering no bodily disquiet thereby!

We live, as the Rappahannock is supported, on what? Heaven only knows.

And our destination—our end? Who knows?

VII

EXTRACT from the Rappahannock's log, October 10, 1920, as written by Lieutenant Parke:

Altitude sixty thousand feet, approximated. Situation unchanged. Electrical phenomena on increase. Professor Grimes and others studying new manifestations.

The peculiar force about us, which must be sustaining us in this almost infinitely thin atmosphere, has indeed been showing itself in a strange way. The ship, even in the twilight of our shortening days, is now run and streaked with fluid electricity; and this not simply now and then, but continuously. Each protruding part, the struts supporting the engine compartments, the thin-bladed vertical and horizontal rudders, the topside runway, the slightly raised parallels of our seven-hundred-foot balloon, where the fabric is drawn tightly against the aluminum framework—all, all, are running with living blue white flame.

On the observation platform, this morning, I myself inadvertently dropped my hand to the rail. I snatched it away quickly; then, instantly realizing that I had come to no harm, I reached out and touched the flickering, phosphorescent lambency of it. I could not feel it. I spread my hand and gripped the rail. The stuff banked up on either side, then flowed over my hand. I

could not feel it. It left no impression upon the skin.

Parke, watching, did the same. Then his eyes fixed upon mine, mutely questioning.

The men, accustomed to the thing now, work in utter disregard of it. The engines, when the tarpaulins are taken off each watch—you see how rigid is our routine, to break the dread and soundless monotony of our existence up here—slowly become covered with the fluid stuff. A hammer held in the open air for a full minute becomes thickly coated with it.

It is strange to see one of the engineers seize from the deck a thing of bluish flame in the shape of a jacking bar—seize it without aversion or comment; and then to see his hand, as the stuff finds its course over the handle impeded by his grip, quickly also flame and glow with it. Strange, indeed—and yet, so far as we can see, it does no harm.

Parke and I had difficulty, during our watches, in taking sights atop the ship. No sooner was the sextant out of its case than it also ran with the phosphorescent blue. It was only by calling a quartermaster to stand by and continually flick the instrument with a bit of gauze that I could catch the faint reflection of a star. Heaven only knows if it can be done at all a week from to-day!

We believe now that the reason for the failure of our storage batteries and other means of generating electricity is that the polar atmosphere about us is so overwhelmingly surcharged with electricity itself that their own mean effort is entirely *numbed*—not *neutralized*, but simply overwhelmed, made futile, *numbed*. We have long since come to the conclusion that the situation is not a passing one.

We need no food, because the cellular breakdown and renewal of flesh and bone is effectually stopped, our bodies having become impregnated with electricity in their every atom. We need no air—though through inherent habit our lungs still perform the function of breathing—because our blood now carries no waste matter that requires oxygen to burn up. In a word, metabolism has ceased within our bodies. Cell life continues—fed and sustained and withheld from natural deterioriation by the electricity that has literally been *soaking* into us during the last six months.

We are physically cleansed. We live—tremendously. Our bodies are held thus in a sort of *status quo*, but alive with the all-powerful force of which man as yet knows so little.

Professor Grimes, in consultation yesterday, looked at me gravely at the end of our discussion, then wrote one sentence—in form, a question:

"Does it mean that life is electricity—and electricity, *life*?"

Neither nodding nor shaking my head, all that I could do was to stare gravely back in return.

Another thing occurred to-day that brings us again to the hopelessness of our position.

We have been dropping parachutes weekly, having discontinued the daily attempt to send messages earthward because of shortage of materials. This morning we made another effort, using the colored bunting of some of the last of our signal flags for the parachute itself. To this we attached the message, having sealed it in a small tin.

We dropped it overboard. It fell like a plummet, as we had seen others do before, for lack of sustaining air. We watched it as it dropped away, leaning over the open cockpit of the engine compartment, whence we let it fall.

Recall now that the cold is intense, though we do not feel it—more than one hundred and fifty-six degrees below zero centigrade, at which point our means of measuring temperature all fail. Recall, also, that in this rarefied atmosphere there can be but very little friction upon the surface of even a rapidly falling body.

Imagine our consternation, then, at seeing the parachute, swiftly descending through space toward the earth that we cannot see, suddenly begin to glitter like a star, then literally burst into a thousand sparkling bits—and vanish.

Parke, the two enginemen in the compartment, and I looked at one another, whiter-faced than was now natural up here. Then, with a finger at my lip, I shook my head to the machinists and took Parke by the arm.

In my own stateroom Professor Grimes heard our story. He nodded grimly.

"Gathered more electricity in its rush downward than the fabric could stand. Literally, it blew up. Simple answer, but to what other cause can we attribute it?"

OCTOBER 15, 1920.—I was sitting at my desk to-day, reading, when I felt a light touch on my shoulder. I looked up and about. There was no one there.

Thinking nothing of it, I returned to my book. Shortly again came the touch. I turned again—no one there. I leaped to my feet. Davis had been thus touched. I stared about me, feeling my heart pounding.

Then I laughed at my fears, put the book down on the desk, locked the stateroom door, and methodically examined every nook and cranny of the room. No living thing save myself was in it.

I closed the two ports, ascertained again that my door was secure, and sat me down. Shortly I became absorbed in my book again—a providential dispensation, this ability to become part of another man's story, to forget the present! Then came another light touch, this time upon my right cheek.

Recoiling within myself, I held steady. The touch came again, more boldly than before, it seemed to me, though perhaps it was only that my sense were more tensely alert.

Still I gripped myself. With all my will I kept my hands upon the book, my eyes upon the page I but vaguely saw.

Again the touch—this time almost concretely. I flashed my hand up. Nothing!

I stared at my hand. There was naught of the bluish fluid stuff I thought I would see upon it. I leaped up, and examined my cheek in the little mirror on the opposite bulkhead. There was nothing of the stuff on it.

I began to feel strongly the sense of uncanniness that must have been Davis's some days ago. I called Grimes to my room, and told him. To my astonishment he wrote:

"I felt it, too—yesterday—twice."

I repeated to him the experience Parke and I had had with the sphere of stuff rolling toward us on the runway above the balloon envelope. He shook his head.

"I saw nothing when the touch came."

"Nor did I."

"The second touch seemed—if I may use the word—bolder," he wrote.

"In my case, also."

"Some hitherto unmanifested phases of electricity—"

He paused with his pencil as I added:

"What next?"

He shook his head.

EXTRACT from log of the Rappahannock, November 3, 1920, as entered by Lieutenant Leavitt:

Position probably as before—astronomical observations impossible, due to presence of fluid electricity. Elevation practically the same—60,300, approximated.

3.47—Davis, ship's cook, first class, threw himself overboard. Phenomena continue.

Sufficient for the logged account of the day's happenings, but hardly a full explanation of how poor Davis came to be a suicide, and quite insufficient to tell of the real horror of his end.

It has been a full day—too full.

At about nine o'clock of the first morning watch, Leclerc, the little photographer, came to me. His face was very grave, his beady eyes wide open for the first time I have ever seen them so. I rose at once. I knew him to be an excitable person, and his manner of approach as if walking on eggs, as well as the appearance of his eyes, bade me be ready.

"Captain," he wrote, "will you come to my dark room for a moment?"

I followed without a word.

He closed the door behind me, and locked it. He went to the ports, and screwed down their sheet aluminum blinders; then he turned to me.

It was the first time for four months or more that I had been in the absolute dark. I gasped. The room was black, I say, and yet before me I could see Leclerc. I could see his face, his head. Below, and to his left I could see one hand still upon the shelf at his side, below and to his right I could see the other hand hanging by his side.

I could see them, I say. They glowed as from within with a luminosity of the same phosphorescent blue-white of the fluid electricity we daily behold about the outstanding features of the ship. I could see his every facial blemish, his small, dark eyes, his rat-colored hair, the discoloration of his bitten fingernails. One and all they glowed, as if impregnated with it—with that blue-white stuff.

Uncanny? I recalled what had occurred in my stateroom three weeks before, when I had first felt the touch upon my cheek, and I shivered.

The photographer's right hand raised and pointed. I looked down—and seized my own right hand with the left. Both glowed in the

same way. I pointed to my face, and the glowing head of Leclerc nodded, his eyes fixed gravely upon mine.

Motioning him to wait, I opened the door and examined my hand. In the twilight outside I appeared as usual.

I sought out the professor, and fetched him to the dark room. He, too, glowed in every exposed part.

I tore off my tunic, my shirt. Not only the parts of my body ordinarily exposed to the atmosphere were affected, but even those hidden. Our very bodies were saturated with electricity. No wonder we are so alert, so *alive!*

We left the room, the professor and I, and went to my own.

"We should have suspected this," I wrote.

He nodded.

"It keeps us alive. It only requires darkness to be seen," he returned.

"What is the end?" I put to him, as I had done many days before.

Again he shook his head.

It was but an hour after this episode that a man came to me, running.

"Davis—gone crazy, sir! He's struggling to—"

I dashed after the man. I felt upon face and hands a peculiar tingling which I did not then particularly note.

In one of the engine compartments—the middle one on the starboard side—was a confused and writhing heap of men. I could see their mouths open, could see their lips snarl curses, but I could hear nothing of either voices or scuffling.

I cried to them to stop, not hearing my own voice. One of them, Warrant Machinist Willis, flashed me a glance. I could almost read his words:

"He wants to jump overboard!"

Then I recognized Davis as his face showed from the mass of them. He, too, flashed me a look—a glare of horror and of appeal. His lips moved mutely:

"I can't—I can't stand it—I can't—"

Again I ordered them to cease, and ordered Davis to quit his struggling. The man who had come for me leaped in upon Davis as the cook renewed his efforts to get away; but the madman seemed endowed with almost superhuman strength. It took the five of us to hold him, to bring him to his feet.

At last he stood before me, held by two men on each side. I jerked out my pad and pencil.

"We are your friends, Davis. What is the trouble?"

He began to speak, his eyes fixed hollowly on mine. I saw that he was half mad with horror. I read in his eyes a pleading for release from that horror. Bidding the men release one of his hands, I gave him the pencil and held the pad, that he might write.

"I've got to quit, sir. I can't stand them—I can't. All the time touching me, captain. Before I go crazy—I've got to quit! My other hand, sir—look at it, look at it!"

He made a convulsive effort with his left hand, and the men, thinking he was making another attempt to break away, gripped him hard. I stared down at the hand, and felt my heart give a savage jolt within me.

The two men on his left held him by shoulders, arm, and wrist; but the hand, the left hand itself, I could hardly see. It was almost transparent. At the wrist I could make out, through Davis's flesh, two of the fingers, shadowlike, of the hand of the man who was gripping it.

The scene in Leclerc's dark room was fresh upon me. I know, too, that again I lifted my own hands and stared dumbly upon them. Inwardly I gave a sigh of relief, for they appeared as usual; but Davis's—the finger tips were gone, utterly. The remaining joints were but vaguely apparent. The palm was only an outlined shadow against the dark of his uniform.

I looked into his eyes, and read again the plea for release.

The four men holding him, no doubt following my first stare, suddenly fell back, with consternation and sudden terror on their faces.

Instantly Davis had whipped away. Before a single one of us realized his intention, he had put that awful translucent hand upon the blue running rail, and had vaulted over into space!

For a moment we froze there. Then, as one, we jumped to the rail.

Turning over and over pathetically as he fell, Davis was swiftly becoming a little black thing in the pale blue space beneath us. I watched him, dry-lipped, as if hypnotized. In the back of my mind something was saying:

"Wait! Wait! Wait!"

I did—we did. He was but a tiny dark speck now.

"Wait! Wait!"

Only an atom—falling, falling away—a soul drowned in horror—

Came a sudden tiny flash, a crystal glitter of showering particles against the distant blue; and Davis, like the parachute, had vanished.

VIII

EXTRACT from the log of the Rappahannock, second afternoon watch, December 19, 1920, entered by Lieutenant Leavitt.

Situation as before. Altitude, 63,500 feet, approximated. Corresponding position on earth's surface continues indeterminate. Personnel physically well, otherwise in continual state of hopelessness and suspense. Driggs, machinist's mate, first class, threw himself overboard at 4.47—the sixth man to do so thus far. Claimed to have seen things.

More terse comment upon the day's happenings, you see!

During the last two months, then, we have lost a total of six men. Each claimed to have been touched by unseen things. One, the day before he became a suicide, swore that he had been struck a hard blow. Driggs himself, only this morning, believed that he had heard a voice and then felt a heavy impact, as of a dense but invisible body. He declared then and there to me that if it occurred again, he would follow the others.

"I don't care, captain, if it does mean that I'll be blown to bits. That's quick death, anyway, and better than falling twelve miles to earth, thinking about when I'd strike, and yelling because I'd changed my mind about wanting to die!"

No, he did not write this with the vestige of a smile, nor did it strike me at all in the way of humor. Hardly!

"If it happens again," he went on, "I'll follow the others!" He hesitated for a moment, his eyes holding mine in mute question. Then he bent to the pad again. "You won't try to stop me, captain?"

What was I to say to that?

Surely we are lost to mankind and deserted by God; and Driggs sought only peace—peace. I shook my head slowly. His face lit, and he drew a deep breath.

"Thank you, captain," he wrote.

And before five hours had elapsed, his comrades, peering down over the rail in hypnotic fascination, saw him disintegrate into a thousand flashing atoms that vanished in the deepening blue of the void beneath and about us.

I do not blame him, nor does my conscience cry against me for not attempting to prevent him from carrying out his intention. In a way, I think that he, and the others, have done well. Men they were born, and they wanted to die as men. Surely a manly desire, a completely human one! No—there can be no blame.

Many things have happened since my last writing in this journal.

The arctic winter is upon us. Far below there must be blizzard, whooping yell of wind, marrow-freezing chill, cloud upon cloud of dense and blinding snow. Here there is still intense elemental peace.

We peer over the side—there is naught below us, nor about us, save an infinity of dark blue space. We know what must be below only because our log shows it to be December, and because now the sun does not rise above the southern horizon. I use the term "horizon" merely relatively, for we cannot see a horizon line, only a cessation of the stars.

The entire ship is now aglow, but daily, against the darkness of the void about us, it is becoming more palely so. That may sound paradoxical; but read on.

A month ago, and more than a month after Davis showed us his transparent hand, the great shape of the balloon above our living compartments became alive with flickering phosphorescent flame. Our living and work compartments themselves were aglow in every part. Leclerc's dark room was no longer dark. Entering it, we merely passed into a cubicle whose walls were running with fluid electricity. Inside it or out, every man of us was aglow with the same horrid hue.

We live in a partial darkness now, with the sun making summer far to the south. In the darkness we men march about our duties with all the semblance of ghosts—ghosts on a ghostly ship, on a ghostly, soundless ship, hanging in a soundless and seemingly infinite space.

Our routine itself has become almost ghostly to me. The others tell me that it is so to them, too. We still feel physically alert—yes, but about our duties we have come to plod. The zest inspired by hope has gone. The adventure of it, the spell of the unknown, has lost completely its savor. We

are horribly tired of our physical alertness. We are rapidly tiring of our mental alertness.

Did you ever think what it must mean never to cease consciously to think? Then pity us! Minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, and the days running into weeks, the weeks into months, without the blessed hiatus of sleep—we are alert in body and in mind. Blame Davis? Blame Driggs? No!

DECEMBER 22, 1920.—To-day something new occurred, and because of it I have taken to this journal once more. We know not what it means. We know not to what it may lead. It only happened, as other things have happened. On earth we heard of such things—more often than not we scoffed. There were many things we then deemed to be mere figments of the imagination of deluded or mentally deranged people.

But this—there are other witnesses than I—this actually happened.

To help kill the monotony, my brother officers and I have been for some time engaged in the attempt to develop a new method of fixing position by sun and star sight—a system that will be as effective as that of Marc St. Hilaire, and yet vastly simpler in its application.

We were chosen for this expedition—I say it in all modesty; it is simply the fact—because we were mentally equipped above the average of our fellows. Here we find even greater mental celerity. The electric atmosphere has speeded and clarified our ratiocinative processes, we verily believe, beyond the experience of men living in the denser and less highly sensitized atmosphere closer to the surface of the earth. We find our minds reaching out to conclusions even before we perceive the logical pathway leading to those conclusions.

We have not entirely understood this peculiarity of our brains' newer functioning. We simply accept the fact. Hence our ambition along navigational lines.

I was in my room this afternoon, engaged on this work. I had almost come to a conclusion, but for some reason, despite what I have just said, I could not grasp it. It was there before me. My mind encompassed it, and yet did not make full contact with it.

It was as if my brain was a magnetized circle, and the conclusion a tiny ball, also magnetized, and yet of opposite polarity. I held it, and yet it stood away.

Perhaps for half an hour I pondered thus. Then I had a feeling that some one was at my door, or approaching it. We do not knock now, of course, for there is no sound. I arose and opened the door.

Parke was standing outside, his hand outstretched as if he had reached for the knob. He looked at me expectantly.

"Here I am, captain," his lips said.

I stared at him abstractedly, for a moment, my mind still filled with the problem. Then I nodded him in, to a chair, and we both sat down.

For a moment I still groped for my conclusion. Then, awakening, I turned to him.

"What has happened now, Parke?" I wrote.

He looked at me.

"Nothing, captain; but you sent for me, did you not?"

I stared back at him.

"No! I have been engaged in this thing."

I indicated my papers, through whose thinly spread blue surfaces the black figures of my penciling stood out.

He arose.

"I felt sure. Some one told me that you wanted me. Sorry!"

"I'm glad you came, anyway," I wrote. "Help me on this."

IN a moment more we were plunged in analysis, and two minds were attempting to seize upon the elusive conclusion that I comprehended but could not grasp.

Parke and I were successful, but I wonder if men will ever use our formula!

To go on—my mate left shortly, and I rose to go on watch. I was pacing the topside runway when I saw Professor Grimes emerge from the manhole leading upward from below, through the gas compartments of the ship.

He waved his hand and stepped quickly forward. On his face was a look of curiosity and expectancy—as there had been on that of Lieutenant Parke.

"What's up?" I queried, knowing him to be the ablest lip-reader aboard.

His gaze fastened upon my eyes.

"Didn't you send for me?" he asked.

I shook my head, smiling dully. Then, suddenly—without rime or reason, perhaps—a startling conclusion leaped to my mind. I reached out and seized his arm.

"Come down to my room!"

Seated there, I wrote:

"What made you think I wanted you up here?"

"I heard some one say that you did, captain."

"Did you hear some one say it, or did you only think so?"

He eyed me seriously for a moment. Then, suddenly, he started half out of his seat. His lips formed the exclamation:

"Good Lord! *That?*"

I nodded—rather grimly, I imagine.

"I did not call you, Professor Grimes. I did not send for you; but when I first went to the observation platform I did wish you were with me. The uncanniness—this licking blue flame—the utter silence—I wanted company, and I wanted yours." I stopped writing for a space, looking into his widened eyes. Then I added: "Has it come to that?"

"Good Lord!" His lips formed the startled words again.

"Half an hour ago," I went on, "I was stumped on that new navigation problem that we're working on. I remember now having wished that Parke was with me. In a minute more he was at the door, saying that he had come because I had called him."

"Good Lord!"

"Electricity—this atmosphere is very little else—does it carry our *thoughts?*"

For some minutes we sat there, looking into each other's eyes, wondering, pondering. I, for one, felt strange pricklings run over my skin.

The professor bent, and suddenly asked: "Or—telepathy?"

"Heaven knows! But it's something—"

Reason swiftly returned. I recalled my mockery of the so-called mediums on earth. I remember, somewhat loathingly now, my scoffing at newspaper reports of strange mind communication in India, in occult circles of San Diego, of uncanny messages of death at sea received by a widow five thousand miles away, before she knew by radio of the ship's disaster that had widowed her.

I had never wondered then—I had only laughed. Coincidence! Or, because told after the real message had arrived, a lie! But now I began to think.

There are magnetic waves running over the close surface of the earth. Might not some few individuals among mankind become mentally attuned? And so, even though unconscious of their own powers, even though hard-headed mockers of things they cannot see, might not their last thought of minds attuned to their own have been communicated to those minds?

Here, twelve miles above the highly magnetized polar region, we are all but electricity ourselves. Are we becoming so intensely electrified that soon we shall not even need to write, shall not need to read the lips, but will be able to read the minds of those with whom we would speak?

Professor Grimes and I set at the task of experiment. It mattered little, we felt, but it would be something new to pass the time.

We were not very successful; yet a glimpse we now and again had of the other's effort to communicate a thought was sufficient. We are on the verge of something else, it seems. We know not entirely why. We only know the fact.

At the end Professor Grimes again bent to his pad. Finishing, he held it grimly before my eyes.

"Is thought electricity? And again—is electricity *life?*"

God only knows!

Even as I write upon this once yellow pad, I seem to see the desk beneath it. As I glance upward, there is a vague sense of intricate framework. Is it the aluminum skeleton of our aircraft that shows itself thus? Is it the electricity that impregnates all matter up here? Or are we shortly to be gifted with an all-seeing, X-ray sight, as well as an all-comprehending mind?

God only knows!

And God knows, too, how I am beginning to envy the resolution and the terrible fortitude of Davis and Driggs, and the others. Driggs cried as he vaulted over into space:

"I saw it! I *saw!*"

What did he see?

I am interrupted by Leclerc. At least, I feel him call. The matter is urgent, it seems. More later.

IX

LECLERC received me with a secretive look, yet one, too, of wonder on his sharp little face. He closed the door of his dark room behind me, and turned the key.

I glanced about me in the phosphorescent glow of the cramped space. On the low shelf were three trays, in which I could see, faintly glowing with a bluish white light,

placid rectangles of liquid. I recalled his coming to me, the day before, for permission to use a little of the remaining water. We have no use for it, so I had consented. As I then surmised, he had wanted it for some photographic work—the first he had attempted for months.

Now he turned to me and presented a sheet of paper which lies before me as I write. I will give an exact copy of it here:

But this morning did I think to take photographs of Jones, whose right arm is almost vanish to sight. Jones go to most rear engine compartment with me, and help to carry camera gear. I set up camera, and pose Jones in rear of compartment, with arm up, so to be against sky for background. It is very dark for picture, so I try flash light. Apply match, forgetting lack of air. Useless.

I think, too bad—I will try without regard for light. I use three plates, Jones in same position—each plate. I tell him to say nothing to you; also tell other men who see what kind of photograph I take to say nothing to you. I bring plates here to develop. Afraid for no success because of darkness and of electrical condition of all things. But will try.

I develop first plate—nothing. I develop second plate—nothing. I develop third plate—and for a minute I think I have use old plate by accident, or else my eyes are confuse by memory of old time. It is most strange, that picture on third plate. You will see.

He took the paper from me, and nodded to a solution in the nearest of the three hard rubber trays on his shelf. I bent over it, and rubbed my eyes.

He lifted it closer to the surface, handed me a second bit of paper with a dripping hand, having evidently prepared it for my visit.

"Must look at negative while under solution; otherwise covered with electricity," the paper told me.

I stared stupidly.

The lower part of the plate, as he held it, showed a fairly clean-cut shadow at the left, and a taller, shapeless one rising from it at the right—undoubtedly the protecting bulwark about the engine compartment, and the shadowed figure of the meteorologist, Jones. But Jones's arm, only a tenuously outlined shadow to our eyes, was clear in every detail in this photograph; and close to it, and slightly above, was a woman's face.

Is it to be wondered at that I stared, and that my jaw dropped?

I jerked up from it finally.

"You're not joking—"

Leclerc shook his head vehemently as he read, if not my lips, at least my eyes and expression, or perhaps—he has not said—my thought? He let the plate zigzag through the solution to the bottom of the tray, and drying his hands, wrote.

"I do not joke, my captain," his pencil told me. "No—I like jokes up here no more than that most unfortunate cook. I am surprised I think to call you. I write on this paper what I have done, and am but ready to take it to you when you are at my door. What can this be, captain?"

"You're sure of the plate?"

He threw out his arms, shoulder high.

"*Mon dieu!*"

"Dead sure?"

"From a new box," he scribbled quickly. "See!"

He showed me the freshly torn wrappings, brushing off the flickering stuff that I might see the clean tears in the paper.

I turned for the door, deciding that Professor Grimes should see. Then, with a grim shrug, I bethought me of my experience a trifle earlier in the day.

"Professor Grimes will be here in a moment," I wrote. "I have called him."

Leclerc gave me one of his peculiar, ratlike, questioning glances, and bent again over his tray.

A moment later, and I knew Grimes was at the door. Indeed, such now was the indefinite consistency of the dark room's bulkheads that I fancied I could make out his form beyond the closed door. I unlocked and opened it, and he entered, with questioning wonder on his face.

"You see I received your message," his lips said.

I motioned Leclerc to give him the first writing. Then Grimes bent with us over the tray. After half a minute he straightened stiffly and brought out his pad and pencil.

"Davis and some of the others," he wrote quickly, "complained of being touched by something; and remember Driggs' last cry—that he had *seen*."

He handed me the paper with a grim nod. Instantly did my mind jump to a conclusion—one which now, five hours after the event, I still maintain.

This photograph—the face and part of the shoulder of a woman! Davis and five others

had gone to a certain doom because they could stand no more. They had been *touched*. So, indeed, had the professor. So had I. So, as has been reported to me during the last two weeks, has every other man on board this ghostly ship.

But Davis and the other five—were they more susceptible to the electric atmosphere than the rest of us? True, they were the first to have parts of their bodies fade into partial invisibility; but was that uncanny vanishing the entire cause of their choice of certain annihilation rather than uncertain existence?

Had they not all, perhaps, *seen*? Succumbing to the mysterious power, had they not finally thought actual madness was coming on, when the truth was that they had *seen*? And did they tell me of their disappearing limbs simply because they felt they would be at once adjudged insane if they told me what they had *seen*?

The parts of Leclerc's photograph that were the most obscure were those which to our naked eyes were most clearly visible. The parts of the photograph that were most boldly apparent were the woman's face and Jones's right arm—the former entirely invisible to our eyes, the latter rapidly becoming so

Had those others been the first of us to *see*?

Aye—I believe that is the truth.

DECEMBER 23, 1920.—Leclerc was not hoaxing us. Today I myself took more than twenty photographs. Ten of these were of members of our diminished personnel whose limbs the persistently seeking electricity has rendered all but transparent. Five I took while standing on the topside runway, with the camera facing blank space to port of the ship. The other five I made haphazard at odd moments as I went about the ship.

Leclerc and the professor and Parke were with me when I took the photographs, and our entire quartet crowded into the dark room to watch the developing.

Another peculiar feature of our situation is that although the dark room is no longer dark, although it is continually aglow with the ubiquitous living blue stuff, nevertheless this light does not affect the plates. The usual red lamp used in dark rooms is not necessary. In fact, had it been required, the work could not have been done, for since our electric light is unavailable, and the lack of oxygen in the air effectually stops our use of oil lanterns, we have no artificial illumination at all.

It was this lack that had previously prevented Leclerc's photographic work. Because of the insufferable monotony, he had made his first experiment without any light save that of the lambent fluid. He had held no hope of any success, and what he found on his third plate—the look in his eyes told me how it had amazed him.

We developed the scores of plates I had exposed. In each case where the photograph had been of the semitransparent portions of men's bodies, those portions were depicted with a clarity of lineament, as well as of outline, that was nothing less than astonishing. The parts that we could still normally see, in the deep twilight surrounding our ghostly ship of the air, were blurred and shadowlike.

We watched in suspense for the appearance of what all of us in the little cubicle had come to suspect; but it was not until we developed the five plates I had used on the topside runway that we found anything unusual. On two of these we could make out dim shadows—upright shadows, one of them bifurcated in the lower part, as might appear the legs of a man. On the third was a larger shadow, in the shape of the head and shoulders of a human being.

That was almost enough; but when one of the plates I had exposed haphazard about the ship blackened into the clear nude body of a man we were convinced.

About us are living humans—another phase of life. How, why, whence, we cannot say; but the camera did not lie. The plates are from a sealed package bearing the government stamp. We exposed them ourselves; we ourselves developed them.

It can only mean, thinks the professor, that as we disappear up here from our normal life, we appear in that other phase or plane. What the end is, what kind of life it may be, we can only conjecture. Meanwhile—we live.

Meanwhile, too, we have been attempting, the professor and I, to get into telepathic touch with our families at home. We have tried to attune our minds to those back on Aluakat. We have not thus far been successful.

But to-day our own power to communicate with each other is stronger than it was

yesterday. Who will say how it may be to-morrow?

Even as I write, I feel something touching my shoulder—as if a butterfly had wandered high in these miles above earth, and were fluttering about my head. I have turned twice, but as yet I have seen nothing. Remembering Davis and the others, and the photographs we have seen to-day, I wonder how long it will be before I turn—and *see*. And what will it be—the thing, or the things, that I shall see?

You may remember the day when Leclerc called me to his dark room, and showed me how our bodies glowed. Now there is no need to enter a place where the natural light—what little we have—is shut off. As I sit here, I believe I could write—indeed, I do write—by the radiance of my own body.

As I sit here, every bit of surface in my room flows with bluish white electricity. It flickers in a wide rectangular pool upon my bunk, it runs with gentle insistence upon the edges of my desk. The photograph of my father is hidden beneath a film of it. This writing I can see for a space, and then it is overflowed. My pencil is coated with bluish light, and when I raise it from the paper the fluid electricity follows like a cord, like gum, thinning as it draws away, finally breaking, and, as if completely elastic, withdrawing instantly to the pad and the pencil.

Horrible—yes, but I am seized with a great curiosity now. I dread what may be; yet, since fate has set me here, I want to see what I may. I curse fate—we all do, a daily anathema—yet I would like above all things to throw her mockery back in her face.

It is this alone, I think, that holds most of us who are left from going mad, or from taking the same means to find an end as did Davis and those who followed him.

X

FEBRUARY 15, 1921.—We are one and all seized with gloom. We are reduced to nineteen men in all. Driggs was the last to destroy himself, so far as we know, but since that date eight others have disappeared. We do not know where; we believe we know how—they have vanished.

We communicate with one another now entirely by telepathy. We have only to think positively of the person with whom we would exchange our thoughts. He receives the call, and, if disposed to speech, we receive his thought to that effect; but we do not indulge much in communicating our thoughts. We dare not.

The seven-hundred-foot, cigar-shaped bulk of the balloon overhead has become merely a vast hovering shadow. The deck we soundlessly tread is a still slighter shadow. We can see the brighter stars directly overhead, despite the fact that the balloon is yet there—a half luminous, half transparent body. Through the bulkheads of our rooms we can see the rising moon in the east.

Walking listlessly about our useless duties, we feel almost that we are treading upon air. We are approaching our end, whatever that end may be.

The professor and I and Barlow, the chief radio electrician—Barlow's powerful body seems to withstand the electric atmosphere best of all the men, and his mind still retains a dying spark of the life that we once knew—are once more beginning to conjecture. Shall we simply dissolve into nothingness, as the eight men who vanished seem to have done? Shall we dissolve thus and become part of the great waves of terrestrial magnetism that sweep from magnetic pole to magnetic pole? Or shall we in some way retain our shapes, our individual physical entities?

Is it disintegration, such as undoubtedly came in a more violent way to Davis, Driggs, and the other five who threw themselves into space? Or is it only the passing into another existence?

Our photographs—the first and last we have taken—would seem to point to the latter; but we do not know, we do not know.

To think that ten months have passed!

APRIL 15, 1921.—Ten more of us have vanished. We realize now how certainly must that be the end of us all. There is no way to prevent it, it seems. At least, we can think of none.

In the last month the balloon above us has become almost entirely invisible. Only here and there, where the aluminum alloy framework is of heavier construction, can we see it.

We, the nine of us still visible to one another, dwell now in one compartment. We communicate but little, yet we live thus for

fear of the horror of passing out alone. We go about the ship in pairs. We literally feel our way, lest inadvertently we should walk over into space; and we have sworn not to end our own lives, come what may.

June 25, 1921.—Today I saw!

Six of our nine have gone as did the rest. Grimes, Barlow, and myself are left. Barlow is sitting beside me as I write, a grim-faced being of tenuous outline—waiting. Professor Grimes is somewhere about the ship.

Today I *saw*. I saw faint outlines out beyond the ship. I saw movement—forms. I communicated with Grimes, and pointed. "No," his answer came back; but Barlow nodded.

"Men—shapes of men."

He started, one ghostly arm stretching rigidly out.

"Barnes!"

Barnes! The name of one of the enginemen, among the first to vanish from out of sight! I sought to make out his heavy-set figure.

Barlow was wildly excited. His thoughts swept on.

"There—he's there! And others I—I—don't know. A hundred of them! Good Heavens! Annie! Annie! Annie!"

His wife, of course. I started, sank back No, he did not mean that she was there. He was merely calling her name in his despair.

I pray that the end may soon come. Oh this waiting—waiting—waiting!

July 4, 1921.—Independence Day! What irony! I alone am left, a prisoner in horrid space. Space? I must confess.

Yesterday, after I called Grimes and received no answer, weakness came. I stepped to the ghostly rail of an engine compartment. I leaped over the side—and I *did not fall!*

Did I touch solid footing? I do not know. I simply did not fall.

I put out a hand and stepped back into the compartment.

There is a great blur about the ship now. The structure itself is almost gone.

My weakness I have perforce thrown aside. Before my own final dissolution—if that be our end, and since Barlow's excitement I do not think it is—I will try to seal this record, so that it will be proof against the electricity about me. There are a few heavier sheets of hard rubber which still, I noted today, retain much of their normal condition and appearance. I tested a bit today, and it fell, although my own body would not. In the ghostly luminosity of what is left of the Rappahannock, these sheets still lie opaque and substantial to my sight.

There is a chance, a chance, and I pray God that it will not fail, for I want no other men to follow us to this place.

July 7, 1921.—All is ready. I can make no parachute. I will simply seal this in a tin, inclose it in hard rubber, and drop it over the side.

Whether or not it will fall, I do not know. Since my own attempt of yesterday I doubt it; but perhaps, because this rubber is less eaten into by the fluid all about us here, it may succumb to gravity. I pray that this may be so. . . .

A woman's face—and smiling!

The stuff will not brush from my paper.

A line more, which I cannot see:

To my brother—

THAT was what we read—Sergeant Harrow and I—standing on the northern snow, with the charred fragments of rubber at our feet.

Long, long, we stared up into the clear blue of the sky. Nothing—nothing to be seen! And yet, even as we stared, twelve miles or more above us in that clear blue was my brother—or what was once my brother.

We returned to our planes. We debated whether or not we should send one of them up to search the aerial altitudes. It was argued that the highest ascent possible to the type of craft we had with us was only about eighteen thousand feet. Moreover, our fuel reserve would not admit of the attempt.

We returned to our landing place east of Point Barrow. We sailed thence for Aluakat. I radioed a code message to Washington—and we were ordered, under oath of secrecy, home.

In Washington I told my story, and showed the strange message dropped from the unknown.

A year passed, and nothing was done. I urged that nothing should be done, for I, as no other man on earth, know my brother; and if I have his warning, I have enough.

He uttered no cry, but his eyes popped out, and his mouth set in a square shape of agony . . .

Fishhead

By IRVIN S. COBB

IT GOES past the powers of my pen to try to describe Reelfoot Lake for you so that you, reading this, will get the picture of it in your mind as I have it in mine.

For Reelfoot Lake is like no other lake that I know anything about. It is an afterthought of Creation.

The rest of this continent was made and had dried in the sun for thousands of years—millions of years, for all I know—before Reelfoot came to be. It's the newest big thing in nature on this hemisphere, probably, for it was formed by the great earthquake of 1811.

That earthquake of 1811 surely altered the face of the earth on the then far frontier of this country.

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It changed the course of rivers, it converted hills into what are now the sunk lands of three states, and it turned the solid ground to jelly and made it roll in waves like the sea.

And in the midst of the retching of the land and the vomiting of the waters it depressed to varying depths a section of the earth crust sixty miles long, taking it down—trees, hills, hollows, and all; and a crack broke through to the Mississippi River so that for three days the river ran up stream, filling the hole.

The result was the largest lake south of the Ohio, lying mostly in Tennessee, but extending up across what is now the Kentucky line, and taking its name from a fancied resemblance in its outline to the splay, reeled foot of a cornfield negro. Niggerwool Swamp, not so far away, may have got its name from the same man who christened Reelfoot; at least so it sounds.

Reelfoot is, and has always been, a lake of mystery.

In places it is bottomless. Other places the skeletons of the cypress-trees that went down when the earth sank, still stand upright so that if the sun shines from the right quarter, and the water is less muddy than common, a man, peering face downward into its depths, sees, or thinks he sees, down below him the bare top-limbs upstretching like drowned men's fingers, all coated with the mud of years and bandaged with pennons of the green lake slime.

In still other places the lake is shallow for long stretches, no deeper than breast high to a man, but dangerous because of the weed growths and the sunken drifts which entangle a swimmer's limbs. Its banks are mainly mud, its waters are muddied, too, being a rich coffee color in the spring and a copperish yellow in the summer, and the trees along its shore are mud colored clear up their lower limbs after the spring floods, when the dried sediment covers their trunks with a thick, scrofulous-looking coat.

There are stretches of unbroken woodland around it, and slashes where the cypress knees rise countlessly like headstones and footstones for the dead snags that rot in the soft ooze.

There are deadenings with the lowland corn growing high and rank below and the bleached, fire-blackened girdled trees rising above, barren of leaf and limb.

There are long, dismal flats where in the spring the clotted frog-spawn cling like patches of white mucus among the weed-stalks, and at night the turtles crawl out to lay clutches of perfectly round, white eggs with tough, rubbery shells in the sand.

There are bayous leading off to nowhere, and sloughs that wind aimlessly, like great, blind worms, to finally join the big river that rolls its semi-liquid torrents a few miles to the westward.

So Reelfoot lies there, flat in the bottoms, freezing lightly in the winter, steaming torridly in the summer, swollen in the spring when the woods have turned a vivid green and the buffalo-gnats by the million and the billion fill the flooded hollows with their pestilential buzzing, and in the fall, ringed about gloriously with all the colors which the first frost brings—gold of hickory, yellow-russet of sycamore, red of dogwood and ash, and purple-black of sweet-gum.

BUT the Reelfoot country has its uses. It is the best game and fish country, natural or artificial, that is left in the South today.

In their appointed seasons the duck and the geese flock in, and even semi-tropical birds, like the brown pelican and the Florida snake-bird, have been known to come there to nest.

Pigs, gone back to wildness, range the ridges, each razor-backed drove captained by a gaunt, savage, slab-sided old boar. By night the bullfrogs, inconceivably big and tremendously vocal, bellow under the banks.

It is a wonderful place for fish—bass and crappie, and perch, and the snouted buffalo-fish.

How these edible sorts live to spawn, and how their spawn in turn live to spawn again is a marvel, seeing how many of the big fish-eating cannibal-fish there are in Reelfoot.

Here, bigger than anywhere else, you find the garfish, all bones and appetite and horny plates, with a snout like an alligator, the nearest link, naturalists say, between the animal life of today and the animal life of the Reptilian Period.

The shovel-nose cat, really a deformed kind of fresh-water sturgeon, with a great fan-shaped membranous plate jutting out from his nose like a bowsprit, jumps all day in the quiet places with mighty splashing sounds, as though a horse had fallen into the water.

On every stranded log the huge snap-

ping turtles lie on sunny days in groups of four and six, baking their shells black in the sun, with their little snaky heads raised watchfully, ready to slip noiselessly off at the first sound of oars grating in the row-locks. But the biggest of them all are the catfish!

These are monstrous creatures, these catfish of Reelfoot—scaleless, slick things, with corpsy, dead eyes and poisonous fins, like javelins, and huge whiskers dangling from the sides of their cavernous heads.

Six and seven feet long they grow to be, and weigh 200 pounds or more, and they have mouths wide enough to take in a man's foot or a man's fist, and strong enough to break any hook save the strongest, and greedy enough to eat anything, living or dead or putrid, that the horny jaws can master.

Oh, but they are wicked things, and they tell wicked tales of them down there. They call them man-eaters, and compare them, in certain of their habits, to sharks.

Fishhead was of a piece with this setting. He fitted into it as an acorn fits its cup. All his life he had lived on Reelfoot, always in the one place, at the mouth of a certain slough.

He had been born there, of a negro father and a half-breed Indian mother, both of them now dead, and the story was that before his birth his mother was frightened by one of the big fish, so that the child came into the world most hideously marked.

Anyhow, Fishhead was a human monstrosity, the veritable embodiment of nightmare!

He had the body of a man—a short, stocky, sinewy body—but his face was as near to being the face of a great fish as any face could be and yet retain some trace of human aspect.

His skull sloped back so abruptly that he could hardly be said to have a forehead at all; his chin slanted off right into nothing. His eyes were small and round with shallow, glazed, pale-yellow pupils, and they were set wide apart in his head, and they were unwinking and staring, like a fish's eyes.

His nose was no more than a pair of tiny slits in the middle of the yellow mask. His mouth was the worst of all. It was the awful mouth of a catfish, lipless and almost inconceivably wide, stretching from side to side.

Also when Fishhead became a man grown his likeness to a fish increased, for the hair upon his face grew out into two tightly kinked slender pendants that drooped down either side of the mouth like the beards of a fish!

If he had any other name than Fishhead, none excepting he knew it. As Fishhead he was known, and as Fishhead he answered. Because he knew the waters and the woods of Reelfoot better than any other man there, he was valued as a guide by the city men who came every year to hunt or fish; but there were few such jobs that Fishhead would take.

Mainly he kept to himself, tending his corn-patch, netting the lake, trapping a little, and in season pot hunting for the city markets. His neighbors, ague-bitten whites and malaria-proof negroes alike, left him to himself.

Indeed, for the most part they had a superstitious fear of him. So he lived alone, with no kith nor kin, nor even a friend, shunning his kind and shunned by them.

His cabin stood just below the State line, where Mud Slough runs into the lake. It was a shack of logs, the only human habitation for four miles up or down.

Behind it the thick timber came shouldering right up to the edge of Fishhead's small truck patch, enclosing it in thick shade except when the sun stood just overhead.

HE COOKED his food in a primitive fashion, outdoors, over a hole in the soggy earth or upon the rusted red ruin of an old cookstove, and he drank the saffron water of the lake out of a dipper made of a gourd, faring and fending for himself, a master hand at skiff and net, competent with duck-gun and fishspear, yet a creature of affliction and loneliness, part savage, almost amphibious, set apart from his fellows, silent and suspicious.

In front of his cabin jutted out a long fallen cottonwood trunk, lying half in and half out of the water, its top side burnt by the sun and worn by the friction of Fishhead's bare feet until it showed countless patterns of tiny scrolled lines, its underside black and rotted, and lapped at unceasingly by little waves like tiny licking tongues.

Its farther end reached deep water. And it was a part of Fishhead, for no matter how far his fishing and trapping might take him in the daytime, sunset would find him back there, his boat drawn up on the bank, and he on the other end of this log.

From a distance men had seen him there many times, sometimes squatted motionless as the big turtles that would crawl upon its dipping tip in his absence, sometimes erect and motionless like a creek crane, his misshapen yellow form outlined against the yellow sun, the yellow water, the yellow banks —all of them yellow together.

If the Reelfooters shunned Fishhead by day they feared him by night and avoided him as a plague, dreading even the chance of a casual meeting. For there were ugly stories about Fishhead—stories which all the negroes and some of the whites believed.

They said that a cry which had been heard just before dusk and just after, skittering across the darkened waters, was his calling cry to the big cats, and at his bidding they came trooping in, and that in their company he swam in the lake on moonlight nights, sporting with them, diving with them, even feeding with them on what manner of unclean things they fed.

The cry had been heard many times, that much was certain, and it was certain also that the big fish were noticeably thick at the mouth of Fishhead's slough. No native Reelfooter, white or black, would willingly wet a leg or an arm there.

Here Fishhead had lived, and here he was going to die. The Baxters were going to kill him, and this day in late summer was to be the time of the killing.

The two Baxters — Jake and Joel — were coming in their dugout to do it!

This murder had been a long time in the making. The Baxters had to brew their hate over a slow fire for months before it reached the pitch of action.

They were poor whites, poor in everything, repute, and wordly goods, and standing—a pair of fever-ridden squatters who lived on whiskey and tobacco when they could get it, and on fish and cornbread when they couldn't.

The feud itself was of months' standing.

Meeting Fishhead one day in the spring on the spindly scaffolding of the skiff landing at Walnut Log, and being themselves far overtaken in liquor and vainglorious with a bogus alcoholic substitute for courage, the brothers had accused him, wantonly and without proof, of running their trout-line and stripping it of the hooked catch—an unforgivable sin among the water dwellers and the shanty boaters of the South.

Seeing that he bore this accusation in silence, only eyeing them steadfastly, they had been emboldened then to slap his face, whereupon he turned and gave them both the beating of their lives—bloodying their noses and bruising their lips with hard blows against their front teeth, and finally leaving them, mauled and prone, in the dirt.

Moreover, in the onlookers a sense of the everlasting fitness of things had triumphed over race prejudice and allowed them—two freeborn, sovereign whites—to be licked by a nigger! Therefore they were going to get the nigger!

The whole thing had been planned out amply. They were going to kill him on his log at sundown. There would be no witnesses to see it, no retribution to follow after it. The very ease of the undertaking made them forget even their inborn fear of the place of Fishhead's habitation.

For more than an hour they had been coming from their shack across a deeply indented arm of the lake.

Their dugout, fashioned by fire and adz and draw-knife from the bole of a gum-tree, moved through the water as noiselessly as a swimming mallard, leaving behind it a long, wavy trail on the stilled waters.

Jake, the better oarsman, sat flat in the stern of the round bottomed craft, paddling with quick, splashless strokes. Joel, the better shot, was squatted forward. There was a heavy, rusted duckgun between his knees.

Though their spying upon the victim had made them certain sure he would not be about the shore for hours, a doubled sense of caution led them to hug closely the weedy banks. They slid along the shore like shadows, moving so swiftly and in such silence that the watchful mudturtles barely turned their snaky heads as they passed.

So, a full hour before the time, they came slipping around the mouth of the slough and made for a natural ambuscade which the mixed-breed had left within a stone's jerk of his cabin to his own undoing.

Where the slough's flow joined deeper water a partly uprooted tree was stretched, prone from shore, at the top still thick and green with leaves that drew nourishment from the earth in which the half uncovered roots yet held, and twined about with an exuberance of trumpet vines and wild fox-grapes. All about was a huddle of drift—last year's cornstalks, shreddy strips of bark, chunks of rotted weed, all the riffle and dunnage of a quiet eddy.

Straight into this green clump glided the dugout and swung, broadside on, against the protecting trunk of the tree, hidden from the inner side by the intervening curtains of rank growth, just as the Baxters had intended it should be hidden, when days before in their scouting they marked this masked place of waiting and included it, then and there, in the scope of their plans.

THERE had been no hitch or mishap. No one had been abroad in the late afternoon to mark their movements—and in a little while Fishhead ought to be due. Jake's woodman's eye followed the downward swing of the sun speculatively.

The shadows, thrown shoreward, lengthened and slithered on the small ripples. The small noises of the day died out; the small noises of the coming night began to multiply.

The green bodied flies went away and big mosquitoes, with speckled gray legs, came to take the places of the flies.

The sleepy lake sucked at the mud banks with small mouthing sounds, as though it found the taste of the raw mud agreeable. A monster crawfish, big as a chicken lobster, crawled out of the top of his dried mud chimney and perched himself there, an armored sentinel on the watchtower.

Bull bats began to flitter back and forth, above the tops of the trees. A pudgy muskrat, swimming with head up, was moved to sidle off briskly as he met a cotton-mouth moccasin snake, so fat and swollen with summer poison that it looked almost like a legless lizard as it moved along the surface of the water in a series of slow torpid *s's*. Directly above the head of either of the waiting assassins a compact little swarm of midges hung, holding to a sort of kite-shaped formation.

A little more time passed and Fishhead came out of the woods at the back, walking swiftly, with a sack over his shoulder.

For a few seconds his deformities showed in the clearing, then the black inside of the cabin swallowed him up.

By now the sun was almost down. Only the red nub of it showed above the timber line across the lake, and the shadows lay inland a long way. Out beyond, the big cats were stirring, and the great smacking sounds as their twisting bodies leaped clear and fell back in the water, came shoreward in a chorus.

But the two brothers, in their green covert, gave heed to nothing except the one thing upon which their hearts were set and their nerves tensed. Joel gently shoved his gun-barrels across the log, cuddling the stock to his shoulder and slipping two fingers caressingly back and forth upon the triggers. Jake held the narrow dugout steady by a grip upon a fox-grape tendril.

A little wait and then the finish came!

Fishhead emerged from the cabin door and came down the narrow footpath to the water and out upon the water on his log.

He was barefooted and bareheaded, his cotton shirt open down the front to show his yellow neck and breast, his dungaree trousers held about his waist by a twisted tow string.

His broad splay feet, with the prehensile toes outspread, gripped the polished curve of the log as he moved along its swaying, dipping surface until he came to its outer end, and stood there erect, his chest filling, his chinless face lifted up, and something of mastership and dominion in his poise.

And then—his eye caught what another's eyes might have missed—the round, twin ends of the gun barrels, the fixed gleam of Joel's eyes, aimed at him through the green tracery!

In that swift passage of time, too swift almost to be measured by seconds, realization flashed all through him, and he threw his head still higher and opened wide his shapeless trap of a mouth, and out across the lake he sent skittering and rolling his cry.

And in his cry was the laugh of a loon, and the croaking bellow of a frog, and the bay of a hound, all the compounded night noises of the lake. And in it, too, was a farewell, and a defiance, and an appeal!

The heavy roar of the duck gun came!

At twenty yards the double charge tore the throat out of him. He came down, face forward, upon the log and clung there, his trunk twisting distortedly, his legs twitching and kicking like the legs of a speared frog; his shoulders hunching and lifting spasmodically as the life ran out of him all in one swift coursing flow.

His head canted up between the heaving shoulders, his eyes looked full on the staring face of his murderer, and then the blood came out of his mouth, and Fishhead, in death still as much fish as man, slid, flopping, head first, off the end of the log, and sank, face downward slowly, his limbs all extended out.

One after another a string of big bubbles came up to burst in the middle of a widening reddish stain on the coffee-colored water.

The brothers watched this, held by the horror of the thing they had done, and the cranky dugout, having been tipped far over by the recoil of the gun, took water steadily across its gunwale; and now there was a sudden stroke from below upon its careening bottom and it went over and they were in the lake.

But shore was only twenty feet away, the trunk of the uprooted tree only five. Joel, still holding fast to his shot gun, made for the log, gaining it with one stroke. He threw his free arm over it and clung there, treading water, as he shook his eyes free.

Something gripped him — some great, sinewy, unseen thing gripped him fast by the thigh, crushing down on his flesh!

He uttered no cry, but his eyes popped out, and his mouth set in a square shape of agony, and his fingers gripped into the bark of the tree like grapples. He was pulled down and down, by steady jerks, not rapidly but steadily, so steadily, and as he went his fingernails tore four little white strips in the tree-bark. His mouth went under, next his popping eyes, then his erect hair, and finally his clawing, clutching hand, and that was the end of him.

JAKE'S fate was harder still, for he lived longer—long enough to see Joel's finish. He saw it through the water that ran down his face, and with a great surge of his whole body, he literally flung himself across the log and jerked his legs up high into the air to save them. He flung himself too far, though, for his face and chest hit the water on the far side.

And out of this water rose the head of a great fish, with the lake slime of years on its flat, black head, its whiskers bristling, its corpsy eyes alight. Its horny jaws closed and clamped in the front of Jake's flannel shirt. His hand struck out wildly and was speared on a poisoned fin, and, unlike Joel, he went from sight with a great yell, and a whirling and churning of the water that made the cornstalks circle on the edges of a small whirlpool.

But the whirlpool soon thinned away into widening rings of ripples, and the cornstalks quit circling and became still again, and only the multiplying night noises sounded about the mouth of the slough.

The bodies of all three came ashore on the same day near the same place. Except for the gaping gunshot wound where the neck met the chest, Fishhead's body was unmarked.

But the bodies of the two Baxters were so marred and mauled that the Reelfooters buried them together on the bank without ever knowing which might be Jake's and which might be Joel's!

I jumped and drew the wounded man before the television window

By RAY CUMMINGS

Crimes of the Year 2000

No. 2: The Television Alibi

AS a member of New York's Shadow Squad — tough, hard and generally ill-natured, or at least so my fellows tell me — I don't suppose it's very fitting for me to sermonize. I have no such intention. But I am thinking that the case which I call "The Television Alibi" illustrates the point that fundamental rightness of action has a providential tendency to be re-

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warded. The case may be of interest here. I was involved in it last summer—in June of 1999, to be exact.

My partner, George Trant, assigned with me under Macfarlan of City Night Desk 4, was on his vacation. According to routine, therefore, I had a partial-vacation; "rest-work," they term it. This television case was a routine job on which supposedly I could work alone, without stress or danger. There were a few moments in it, however, when I could have been killed very easily.

It was an unusual case for me, from many angles. Chiefly, it introduced me to the most beautiful and appealing girl I have ever seen. And it tempted me to let a criminal escape. I very nearly did that—and for Jac Lombard, tough, hard ill-natured S. S. man, that certainly was a new experience! Trant, the only person so far to whom I have told the full details, has ever since regarded me with ironic admiration—amazed, he says, that I am human enough to be tempted

The affair occurred on June 25th, 1999. I was supposed to have a rest-day but Macfarlan summoned me.

"Assignment from the Crime Prevention Bureau," he announced. "A perfectly decent young fellow seems liable to commit murder."

He tossed me the memorandum. It involved three people, two of them very well known: Elena Denizon, famous television dancer; Willard Jared, President of the American Television Company; and one George King, a young law student.

The old triangle—two men in love with one girl. The men had had several quarrels, and made threats, perhaps under the heat of too much alcoholite. At any rate, the thing got enough publicity so that the Crime Prevention Desk took it up, and turned it over to Mac.

"Easy job," Mac told me. "A nice relaxing trip to Arizona—Elena Denizon's studio-home. You'll find the boy there with her, probably."

"I think I'll see this Jared first," I said.

"Suit yourself," Mac agreed. "Connect me when you like—I won't worry over you."

I had no trouble getting an interview with Jared. It's Contempt of Law to stall off the investigation of a suspected impending crime. I called Jared on his private wave, and he admitted me at once, though naturally he wasn't very cordial.

I found him just what I had anticipated—a man of forty-five or fifty, flabby and toad-like. He was immaculately dressed, heavily jeweled. His fat face, with small fish-like eyes, was dominated by a big old-fashioned rolling mustache, obviously dyed black. His office and residence was an exotically-furnished tower apartment above the New York City broadcasting studio of his company. It was a somewhat notorious tower—unsavory for the gay parties which Jared held with young women, many of whom he attracted there, no doubt, with promises of a great television career

He sat now, eyeing me coldly across his desk. He said distastefully:

"Jac Lombard? Shadow Squad?"

I told him the purpose of my visit. I said, "The Crime Prevention Bureau wants a report. It is quite confidential, of course. If you are legally engaged to marry this Elena Denizon, we will protect you from any interference."

"She filed public refusal of my claim," he said.

I knew that, of course. "And this George King has claimed her?"

His cold stare clung to me. He said, "If I don't get her, that boy won't get her either."

Now I have had considerable experience with lawbreakers. I'm telepathic enough to know when there is menace radiating from a man. But this was something different—in his eyes I saw a wild, smoldering look, as though on this subject of Elena Denizon he might be demented. Sex psychologists may argue the psychosis of it any way they like. I saw it here.

He repeated slowly, "She can't marry that boy. I won't let that happen."

I drew back slightly. It may seem idiotic to admit it, but I dropped my hand to the Banning gun in my pocket. I said:

"Then my report must show that you are the aggressor."

Thick, dark color suffused his fat cheeks. He said, "Your report be hanged. Aggressor? You—you—I don't want to talk any more about this. I don't want to see the accursed boy again."

"But you do see him. You quarrel with him—"

"He comes to see me."

I stood up to terminate the interview. I said, "I'll talk to him about it. I think the bureau will take legal action to bar him. He must realize that if anything happened to you he will be blamed."

His eyes gleamed at that. I added, "You have exchanged threats. You have threatened him, just now, to me."

He stood up with me. He interrupted, "There is no law to make me talk any more about this, is there?"

"Plenty," I said. "But I have no authority, yet, to force you."

I left him then and took the Sunset, a low-altitude flyer. It was about a three-hour trip to Arizona. I had late supper on board; hired a local plane in Phoenix and flew to the rambling one-story home of Elena Denizon, set isolated in all that was left of the once great Arizona desert, two thousand miles from the image-casting laboratory in New York

Queer whimsy of this girl! But though she was only eighteen, already she was famous enough to get away with it. She hated the city; claimed that her art needed this isolation. And like a hermit, for the summer months she lived here, absolutely alone save for the Indian woman who came by day to do her work.

The television company of necessity had yielded to her whim. Her home here was equipped with a dance floor and the necessary television mechanisms hooked with the laboratory in New York.

I found a landing field and hangar out on the open cactus-strewn desert; and a twenty-foot high metal barrier wall—with an electrified barrage, so the huge warning-sign told me.

At the gate I buzzed for admittance. The lens-eye glowed, carrying my image to her. And presently her voice said:

"Who are you?"

I told her; and I displayed my identifying signature, tattooed on my forearm.

Her voice said pleasantly, "The art of wax-disguise is not difficult. And anyway, you know it won't be Contempt of Law if I refuse to see you now, because I am alone here."

Her saying it didn't prove that George King wasn't here with her. I smiled. I said, "That's true. I made bad connections. I've been four or five hours getting here. I didn't mean to be so late."

Her light laugh rippled at me. "You don't look formidable. I have no old-fashioned conventionality. You may come in."

I dismissed the taxi. The barrage gate slid aside, and closed with a click after me as I passed through. The desert outside was a blank stretch of sand, with undulated waves like a frozen sea, pale in the glittering starlight. But inside I found a fairy garden. Rose-colored tube-lights from hidden sources illumined its winding paths—a glowing garden, a little bower of ferns and vivid flowers which surrounded the bungalow.

The front door slid aside. Elena Denizon, most famous dancer of the air, was before me.

II

SHE sat under a spot of light before her cosmetic table mirror. At my entrance, she turned and surveyed me.

"From the Crime Prevention Bureau?" she said, smilingly. "Sit down, please. You won't mind—I'm busy just now. I go on the air presently."

I sat on a stiff little chair near her.

She powdered her legs with blue-white talc-dust; adjusted the vivid red costume scarf around her breast and hips, and uncoiled the black waves of her hair. She added lightly:

"I do assure your bureau that I am not planning any crime."

She was enough of an actress, of course, so that whatever her emotions, I knew she would not display them. Was George King here? I had no way of guessing. My gaze swept the small dressing room. To one side a big archway opened to the dance floor. It was dim in there now; I could just distinguish the television senders; the waxen and canvas props and scenery, and the banks of lights.

The girl was quietly finishing the coloring of her face, and for a moment I sat silent, regarding her. Glamorous little figure, indeed! Trant insists that right from the beginning I was hypnotized by her, so that no longer was I an S.S. man, but more like a country lout spellbound by meeting an actress.

Maybe so. She sat, save for that red costume scarf, like Lady Godiva enveloped by the long, thick mass of her black hair. Her face was of course familiar to me—I had seen the dancing image of her many times. It was an exceedingly beautiful face, with the stamp of intellectuality upon it. But in the dance, with the surge of music and the hum of the transmitter flinging the image of her around the world, her eyes dark as a moonless night, her mouth red like a scarlet flower—her face then would carry a pagan look, as though this were no girl of the year 1999, but a princess of Barbary, voluptuous as Venus.

Yet chaste as Diana. The public seemed to know that. It was part of the charm which Elena Denizon carried with her dancing to all the far-flung corners of the amusement-seeking world

I said at last, "It wasn't you I came to see, Miss Denizon. I hoped George King would be here."

That startled her, though of course she had anticipated it. She was adjusting heavy jeweled bands on her ankles and tipping the burnished nails of her toes with carmine. She sat up abruptly and faced me . . . I think it was perhaps the involuntary gesture of her hand to the cosmetic table—at all events, I saw for the first time the muzzle of a little golden Banning gun, partly hidden by the cosmetic jars.

But her hand did not touch the gun; she seemed only bracing herself against the table. She said sharply:

"George King?"

I nodded. "The bureau is worried over him."

I gazed vaguely around the apartment. She said:

"But he is not here. I have not seen him—for some time."

"Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head. Hostility was stamped on her now. For all the apparent frankness of her smile, I was aware of it.

"He's in New York, I suppose," she said.

Her hand back on the table came forward as she leaned toward me. She added earnestly: "You represent the law, Mr. Lombard. I want you to be assured of just one thing—George King has nothing to hide. There is no crime—no impending crime. He and I always will deal quite frankly with you."

I stared at her, judging her. The house was very silent, with the silence of the outer spread of desert crowding it. Then there came a sharp buzz, which in the silence startled me as though it had been the hiss of a Banning heat-stab. On a bracket beside the cosmetic table one of the commercial message-mirrors began glowing. Franks, her technician manager, was calling from the broadcasting studio in New York. His voice sounded:

"Elena?"

She said, "You'll excuse me, Mr. Lombard?" She drew down the bracket and gave audible connection.

"You, Franks?"

"Twenty-five minutes only. Are you ready?"

"I will be, of course."

I could see in the mirror-grid over her shoulder the image of Franks' thin face, with the semi-circle of orchestra players partly assembled behind him. He looked strangely worried. He said:

"Elena, you don't let me see you. If you—"

"Oh, I don't mind." She gestured for me to move away from the visual angle of the instrument; then she gave visual connection.

"Lovely as always, Elena," he said.

She smiled. "Did you call me to tell me that?"

"Elena, you—nothing has bothered you tonight?"

That struck me into alertness. A side-angle duplicate of the mirror showed me Franks' image, though he could not see me. His anxious gaze was roving Elena and the angle of the room behind her. . . The sudden premonition came to me that this already might be more than an affair for the Crime Prevention Desk. . .

Franks was saying, "If I live to the age of a pensioned tower-timekeeper, I'll never get used to having you off there alone on that desert."

"You would not like my dancing if I shut myself up in your metal city," she said sweetly.

He smiled back at her, but his eyes still were worried. "Have your own way, Elena. You will, anyhow."

"Because I am a woman?"

"And an artist, which is worse. Be ready on the second, Elena."

"Of course."

They disconnected. She turned and smiled at me. But she was disturbed by the call, that was obvious. I could almost imagine her thinking. Why was he so worried?

Certainly I was thinking it. She began weaving a garland of glittering bangles into her hair.

"I do not mind your staying here to see me dance, if you wish," she said. "But George King must be in New York."

As though in answer, there came the sharp buzz of the signal from the entrance gate of the garden. Someone demanding admittance. Whatever startled premonition came to her, I could see the color draining from her face and throat. The questioning gaze she flung at me seemed to hold an agony of vague terror.

We stood at the mirror-grid, which now showed the garden gate and the starlit desert behind it. A little private airplane was resting there.

Elena gasped, "George—"

It was George King. A tall, slim figure with the starlight glistening on his shiny white flying suit and black helmet, he stood clinging to the gate, drooping. His voice gasped:

"Elena! Elena, dear, let me in! Quick!"

I saw his face, white and strained. Blood smears were on it, and the shoulder of his flying suit was wet with blood.

III

I STOOD aside in the shadows of the room while she ran to meet him in the doorway, with outstretched arms.

"George! You're hurt—why—why—"

He gasped, "It's—nothing. Just bleeding—"

He stumbled as they crossed the threshold—a handsome boy, just twenty, my information from the bureau had told me. His blood-smeared face was chalk white; his lips pallid.

"I didn't—want a doctor," he gasped. "I just wanted to get to you, Elena. It's nothing—just a stab in the shoulder."

He sank from her arms into a chair. He looked as though he were on the verge of fainting from loss of blood. I said:

"We'd better get that jacket off him."

I saw that all the blood seemed to be from a wound in his shoulder. He had smeared it on his hands, and then to his face.

He sat up weakly at the sound of my voice. "Who's that?"

I said: "I'm from the Crime Prevention Bureau. Don't you bother about me. Get that jacket off."

He flung the girl a confused glance. Then he seemed dazed. He sank back, letting us strip off his blood-soaked garments. It was a nasty cut from a knife. His shirts underneath the flying jacket were slashed. But it was only a superficial flesh wound. The bleeding had stopped now. There was no danger save from a possible infection.

I helped the girl bathe the wound in an antiseptic. At my weapon belt I had a little first-aid projector of the healing, germ-killing violet-ray, so I said:

"You'll need surgical treatment for this pretty soon, but this is helpful for now."

He lay relaxed, watching us as we worked on him. He said suddenly:

"S.S. man from the Crime Prevention Bureau? Well, I have nothing to hide. I—you go on the air soon, don't you Elena?"

"Yes," she said. Again it seemed that they exchanged glances.

"I guess I'm all right now. Just weak and dizzy—losing blood, and the pain. You—just let me rest here while you dance. I'll tell this S.S. man—"

"You don't have to," I said. "Not now."

"But he wants to," Elena said quickly. "Don't you understand? We have nothing to hide."

Brave speech indeed. She was no actress now. She regarded me defiantly. She said, "Go on—ask him anything you like. You're the Law—that's your privilege."

I shook my head. "Later—"

"No, now," she insisted. "I'm going to ask you to leave in a minute. You'd better take your chance while you've got it. We don't want you here—"

I smiled. "All right," I said. "King, if you want to explain this, now seems to be your chance. Were you in New York tonight?"

His eyes avoided both the girl and me. He said, "Yes, I was."

"And you saw Willard Jared, didn't you?"

It seemed that all the silence of the desert was crowding us. There was only the boy's labored, panting breath.

I added, "I saw him myself in the late afternoon. You went to see him soon after that, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said at last.

"In his tower studio?"

"Yes."

It shocked Elena. I realized now that she knew no more of this than I. And her fears must have swept her, so that for the moment she forgot what impression her words might make up me. She burst out:

"George! You did go to New York! You did see Jared, and I asked you not to!"

"Well, what if I did?" he flared. "I didn't go looking for trouble. I told him so. I told him—"

She bent forward over him.

"George, look at me. You went and saw Jared. Did he—did he do this to you?"

"Yes," he said abruptly. And suddenly he drew her down to him. "Elena, I love you. I want—"

"Wait, George! Tell me—you didn't do anything to harm Jared? He's—all right, isn't he? Tell me that. Tell me he's—not hurt in any way?"

"No, he's not. Of—of course he's not Elena, I do love you. Not for all the world would I get your name publicly into this. You had nothing to do with it I shouldn't have gone. I know that now. I'm sorry. But no one saw me there. No one saw me leave, or enter. And I wasn't with him very long. He struck at me—I tell you no one knew I was there. I called him on his private wave, and he said come on up and I went, in the outside lift. Oh, it wasn't anything. I didn't do anything to him."

Relief swept her—relief at what he said, whether she believed it or not.

"I suppose he quarreled with you?" she prompted.

"Yes. I told him he'd have to stop annoying you. I'll tell you what happened exactly. You and this S.S. man. You can put this in your report to the Crime Prevention Bureau," he added to me. "But you leave Elena's name out of it. . . . Elena, listen: I told him that you were going to marry me—that you'd already filed public refusal of his claim. I told him that I filed claim for you yesterday—which you know I did—and when the hundred days are up, I told him that then you'd accept me. And he said—he said—"

There was a pause.

"He said—" she prompted.

"He said that if—if he didn't get you I wouldn't either. He went—all white. I never saw a man so white. I reminded him he was fifty and you were eighteen. Ridiculous! I told him so, and then he went white and he struck at me with a knife."

"What knife?"

"It was lying on his desk between us. A thing like an ornament. I jumped and took it away from him. But it cut me—slashed my shirt and into my shoulder. I knocked him back in his chair and for a minute I held him. I never saw a man so white with rage. He couldn't speak He—he looked at me as though he were witless. I guess he is—issuing air-casts the way he has about how he loves you."

"Then what, George? You held him in his chair?"

"Yes. Then I let go of him. I told him again that he'd better keep away from you. I didn't do anything to him. I didn't even hurt him. When I let go of him he jumped for the knife again. I—I just got out. Ran That's all, Elena. That's all I did." He saw her looking at me. He rose up a little in his chair, and said: "You can report it to the Crime Prevention Bureau and the devil take you. But you keep Elena's name—"

"What time was it?" I said.

"When I left him? About four and a half hours ago. Just about that. I took my airplane and flew straight here. There's a fair wind from the northeast at the twenty-thousand foot level."

The girl swung on me. "Are you satisfied? You can go now and file your report. We don't want you here."

She stood before me, grimly imperious. There was only the terror in her eyes. . .

I've no possible idea what I would have done. Young King was lying back in his chair. His eyes were closed; he seemed to have used all his strength. The buzzer sounded again. King did not open his eyes. He had fainted, though we did not know it then.

I said, "What's that? Someone at your gate?"

"No, it's an incoming call. I'll take it."

We received the image and a voice; but she gave only her voice. "I am Elena Denizon. . ."

The little image-grid again showed the face of Franks, with the New York studio room behind him. His voice gave the routine call—seven minutes before her appearance; and then he began talking. It wasn't important. Urging her to give him visual connection. Talking banalities, almost as though he were flirting with her. I stood, unnoticed beside her. Franks couldn't see us. He had only audible connection. . . I stared at that small image of the New York broadcasting studio. Behind Franks, two uniformed men of the New York City police were standing over against the wall. We could see them plainly. And then I saw and recognized the figure of Rankin, Midtown Police Chief.

Franks was saying, "Elena, don't be silly. Let me see you."

"In the dance," she parried. "Can't you wait five minutes, Franks?"

Then suddenly my heart was pounding. The image showed the door to the stairs of Jared's tower apartment over the studio. The door was opening. I heard Elena catch her breath with a little agonized gasp. And Franks heard it.

"What's the matter, Elena?"

"Nothing," she murmured. "What—what is that behind you?"

They were carrying in a stretcher with a white form on it. A white face showed over the covering of white sheet. . . I understood now. Rankin was letting the girl see this, to surprise her, to find out if she had any guilty knowledge.

Somebody said, "Won't need a more complete autopsy. We've got all the evidence now. That fellow King did it."

It was Willard Jared lying there under that sheet. Jared—dead. Murdered.

IV

NOW my partner Trant tells me the Shadow Squad is forever disgraced because I was caught standing witless and let a girl disarm me. However that may be, it certainly did happen I was vaguely aware that Elena reached and snapped off the audiphone. The image faded. And all in that second the shocked and agonized girl wavered backward. I thought she was going to fall. She backed into her cosmetic table and as I reached to steady her, suddenly she stiffened.

"Stand back! Don't touch me. Put up your arms or I'll drill through you!"

The muzzle of her little golden Banning gun came at me, leveled at my chest. Above it I saw her face, with dark eyes blazing.

You never can tell what a girl is liable to do. Her crooked finger was on the sensitive button of the trigger; the safety lever was up; my life hung on the merest grain of pressure of her twitching finger. I own that it gave me a shock. I took a step backward, with upraised arms. And I murmured:

"Careful, there—that trigger is delicate."

She eyed me as though there were nothing else in the world but my face. She said tensely: "Drop your weapon-belt."

Docilely I unloosed it; dropped it to the floor.

"Kick it away."

I kicked it; and abruptly she reached with her left hand under my upraised arms. No skilled criminal ever denuded me of weapons more quickly. She tossed my Banning gun across the room; in the silence it fell with a clatter.

And again she had backed out of reach, still eyeing me with that blazing gaze.

I said quietly, "Don't get excited. I'll do whatever you say."

It seemed that a shudder swept over her. She gasped:

"Oh, George—we've got to kill this man. You've got to escape, George—"

She did not look from my face. Out of the tail of my eye I could see the slumped figure of King in the chair. No answer came from him. I said suddenly:

"Good Lord, he's dead!"

That got her. The little golden muzzle wavered aside as she turned toward the chair with an involuntary, agonized gasp. And in that second I sprang and seized her wrist. The gun-bolt fired. The hissing stab of heat shot over my shoulder and seared the ceiling. There was no strength in her hand. A twisting jerk gave me the weapon as I jumped sidewise.

"George—George, dear—" She went past me. Flung herself to the floor by the chair. "George—don't die, George!"

He was recovering consciousness. He murmured, "Elena, what happened? Why, I guess I fainted—"

Sobbing wildly she drew him to her, caressing him. The audiphone was buzzing. Weapon in hand, I reached for it. Never have I heard so despairing a sob as that which came from the girl. On the arm of the big chair she sat now with King's face pressed against her breast—his face so pallid against that crimson scarf.

I shut off the buzzer and gave audible connection. It was Police Chief Rankin. He gave me both audible and visible. The mirror glowed with the image of his square, grim face.

He said, "Denizon studio? Where is Miss Denizon?"

"She's here," I said. "This is Jac Lombard—S.S., City Night Desk 4. What's in the air, Chief?"

I shot a glance at the chair. Elena was staring at me, breathless. She and young King were beyond the audiphone's visual range. I gave Rankin my image. He said, "Well! Jac Lombard!"

"Hello, Chief. Mac sent me here. Miss Denizon was startled just now. Is Willard Jared really dead?"

I was trying to figure the thing out. Something told me to go easy on what I said or did.

"Murdered," Rankin said. "Obvious who did it. We're after George King. Simple enough case. Jared died with his audiphone transmitter in hand. He called for help and just as he died, he gasped out to the local wave-sorter the name of the man who stabbed him. Young George King."

There was a faint gasp from the chair in the shadows. I made a gesture to silence it. Rankin did not hear the gasp. He went on grimly:

"And we've got chemical proof. Blood on the body and on the desk and the chair. Blood which isn't Jared's blood. This fellow King is native of New York and so the Bartel record of his blood is on file here. We've identified it as George King's blood. A chair was overturned—the desk ornaments scattered. They evidently had a fight. Both of them wounded, and Jared was stabbed to death."

MINGLED with Rankin's grim words, across the background of my mind a stream of conjectures was flowing. A queer phrase of Willard Jared's came back to me, "If I don't get her, the boy never will!" What did he mean by that? And I recalled his wild, irrational look as he had said it. . . The answer to this thing began dawning on me. . .

Rankin was saying, "You'd better call Mac for orders. We'll use you and Trant to track down this fellow King—"

I said abruptly, "George King is here."

The image of the police chief showed his jaw drop with startled surprise as he stared at me. And from the chair, Elena Denizon leaped and stood trembling, gazing wildly. Young King had staggered to his feet. He looked as though he were about to run, but my menacing weapon stopped him.

Rankin said, "George King is there now?"

"Yes. He came a little while ago. Flew his airplane from New York."

Behind Rankin in the New York studio a distant voice called:

"Lights! Lights for Miss Denizon! Two minutes!"

Through the open arcade near me, the great bank of tube-lights over the dance floor was illumined. The room in there was a dazzling blue-white glare. The reflection of it showed me the chair where young King now was sitting weakly upright, staring around him in confusion. And Elena standing nearby. Amazing, the instinct of the artist—the power it had over her. From the radio-speaker above the dance floor she heard now the thrum of the tuning instruments of the studio orchestra. The lights were bathing her. It was almost time for her appearance before the world—that vast unseen audience waiting now to see her dance.

And imperatively that obligation thrust aside her personal anguish. She stood trembling, smoothing her costume scarf. And she was mustering a stage-smile through the blank despair on her face.

Rankin was saying, "George King is there?" His grimness was gone. He added, "Well, I'm certainly relieved, Lombard. Show him to me, will you?"

And I was certainly relieved. I had figured it correctly. I jumped and drew King before the mirror, holding him there in spite of himself. And Rankin said:

"Why, hello, King! I sure am glad you're there! Why, it's a perfect alibi! Jared has only been dead thirty minutes.

By his own dying words to the wave-sorter he was stabbed less than forty minutes ago. No physical way you could get from New York to Arizona in forty minutes! He must have committed suicide. He tried it once before."

Thirty minutes ago! That was about when Franks had called and looked worried. I had had the hunch then of something like this. Jared had committed suicide, to blame it on King! I had seen that suicidal mania in Jared's eyes!

Rankin added, "Jove, it's lucky you showed yourself, young fellow. A little later tonight and the Southwest High Altitude Liner would have killed your chances of an alibi."

Elena had given a half hysterical sob of joy. I don't know whether, even now, she realizes that I gave the boy up to Rankin in order to save him. But I sort of hope she does. . . .

King stood sagging against me, murmuring, "Didn't kill him? Of course I didn't kill him—"

"Ready, Miss Denizon?" The New York director's voice blared from the dance floor speaker. "Take your place. Thirty seconds to go."

The orchestra leader was tapping warningly with his baton. Elena sprang at young King, pulled him from me. Her face was radiant—the impending dance, and the knowledge that King was innocent. She led him back to his chair, stooped and kissed him fervently.

The orchestra began playing. The New York director's voice said:

"Miss Denizon! Entrance!"

"George! George, dear, let me go! Don't hold me now! Sit there and watch me. I'll kiss you all you want when I get through!"

She swayed out under the banks of tube-lights to the rhythm of the dance

The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, 280 Broadway, New York City.

A WISH THAT CAME TRUE

Dear Friends:

You are my friends! After 25 years of Munsey publications coming into my home, you can not be otherwise. All-Story Weekly, Argosy-All-Story, and then Argosy in succession have been the procession that have come weekly to furnish a good part of the reading of a family of five.

Now comes FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES! I am with that group of Munsey fans, a charter member of the F.F.M. and Fantastic Novels group, having become a subscriber with the first issue, all of which I have on file, with my subscription paid up to the first of 1943.

I feel that in this letter, the first I have written in some time to you, that I must add my voice to the voices of the fans in the last issue, that either F.N. should be revived to alternate with F.F.M., or F.F.M. should be issued monthly. I feel of course that in this case it would be absolutely necessary to raise the price of the subscription, which I am sure any fan would be willing to pay. There have been fantastic mysteries enough in Munsey publications in the past to warrant a full length novel at least every other month with the shorter fantastic novels and novelettes being published in the off month. This is not really what I would like to have because I prefer the book-length novels, but it is a suggestion as to how we could get the magazine every month.

The portfolio of Finlay's drawings were very good and soon I will have them all framed and hanging in my den.

I will not at this time comment on any author or fantastic story in particular, but I am an old fan as I have said before, and while years ago I have read some of these stories in serial form in one or the other of the Munsey publications I am reading them all again, and two months is an awfully long time to wait.

And now for a few suggestions from my list of serials and mysterious novelettes:

The Cosmic Courtship, Sarah Was Judith, by Julian Hawthorne; The Planeteer, Homer Eon Flint; Into the Infinite, Austin Hall; The Fragrant Web, Jeremy Lane; Treasures of Tantalus, Garret Smith; The Fire People, The Man Who Mastered Time, by Ray Cummings; and the following by E. R. Burroughs—Tarzan and the Valley of Luna, Tarzan and the Golden Lion, The Moon Maid, Tarzan and the Antmen, The Moon Men, and The Red Hawk.

The foregoing list is only part of what I can take from my files. And they are sent only as suggestions for future issues, and I hope that this letter will be of helpful interest.

WILLIAM E. BIRD

2048 37th St., N. W.
WASHINGTON, D. C.

FROM ONE OF THE GIRLS

I read "Palos of the Dog Star Pack" with delight, was more delighted to learn that it was one of a trilogy . . . here's hoping you give us the other two shortly. I like you policy of giving us squirts who grew up too late to appreciate the classics among St.F. a chance to read them.

"Palos" impressed me a great deal, an excellent story, masterfully written . . . unfortunately, when I like a story, I insist on writing a poem about it. So far, I have never been cured.

So I'm enclosing a poem about the "Palos" trilogy. It will give you proof that I mean it when I say that I *LIKE* F. F. M.

FOR PALOS

Far out where Sirius, brooding, beams
'Mid worlds of splendor, Palos shines
Wrapped in the shimmering stuff of dreams
And Jasor treads her vales and vines:
Yet he too is not what he seems
But mind of Earth in Palos mold.
The grace of Zitu glints and gleams
In warm approval, like a shower of gold.
The Son of Earth, far from his native land
Holds a world's future in a sinewy hand.
For Zitu weighed him in the scales of fate
And gave him golden Naia for a mate.

VIRGINIA "NANEK" COMBS.

Box 62,
CRANDON, WISCONSIN

LIKED "THE RADIO PLANET"

I have been reading science fiction for about two years, but I am a newcomer to fantasy. The first issue of F. F. M. that I read was the Dec. issue with "The Afterglow." I enjoyed it immensely, and would like to read the rest of the "Darkness and Dawn" trilogy.

"The Citadel of Fear" was even better than "The Afterglow." "The Radio Planet" was just as good. That's another trilogy I'd like to read.

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Also I'd like to buy back issues of your mags from the readers. One more request. I'd like to find out where I can buy "The Moon Pool" complete. That ends up the begging list.

Please print the "Ship of Ishtar" soon. I've heard so much about it.

Prepare for a shock, here's one more request. Go Monthly!!!

BANKS MEBANE

RALEIGH ROAD,
WILSON, N. C.

WRITE HIM, FANS!

I have been a constant reader of fantastic and science fiction since 1927 and I have a complete file and library of every F. F. M. and F. N. that you have published. I have a definite lean toward the stories of A. Merritt and J. U. Giesy and also Lovecraft. Seems to me I remember a story by Merritt by the name of the "Bridge of Light." I would certainly like to see a reprint of this story. Now then prevalent in my thoughts at the moment is the "Skylark" series. This is in my opinion the best piece of science fiction to ever have been conceived. If you intend to reprint these, let me know.

It is a little difficult for me to write this letter to you as I am the chief engineer of radio station KRJF and I have to get parts of this letter together between selections from our studio so if I don't make sense bear with me.

I appreciate "The Citadel of Fear" but it seems as if England lets his plot wander to meaningless ends. "Palos of the Dog Star Pack" was an excellent example of a good story and with the love interest it proves to be in the exceptional class. How about the rest of that triology?

Now another question. Where can I get a copy of the "Book of the Dead" and a copy of the "Necronomicon"? I would appreciate any and all help that I can get on this letter and its questions. How about some of you fans shooting me a few letters? I will answer all of them.

ROYAL E. NELSON.

P. O. Box 1015,
MILES CITY, MONTANA

NEW F.F.M. READER

The other morning during an idle moment during my office work, I sauntered into a nearby newspaper stand—where I buy all my magazines, etc.

I asked the lady in charge if she had anything in the horror story line. It seems almost impossible (to me) to get anything with chills and thrills nowadays, beyond murder mysteries, which don't thrill me at all (well, hardly ever). She suggested FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES. Dubiously I purchased the February issue and started reading it the same day—equally dubious.

"THE CITADEL OF FEAR" was one of the most exciting tales I've ever read. May I congratulate you on your selection?

It is my wish that I may acquire back issues of your magazine. If I can, please advise me how and I shall try to get them.

Although your magazine seems to be primarily a man's magazine—judging from the letters in the one issue I've seen—I'm sure all the thrill loving girls like myself will get a kick out of it.

As for my choice of my favorite horror stories of all time—I'd like to see published by your company "Dracula" by Bram Stoker and Sax Rohmer's "The Brood of the Witch Queen," and his "The Day the World Ended."

Keep your good work going strong, and you can be assured that I'll rush to the stand from *now on* to purchase your fascinating magazine.

EVELYN J. STONE.

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DID THE LORD OF EVIL WIN?

Every so often I weary of the stuff that passes for fantasy today, and wearied I turn to the Lord of Fantasy and reread some of his genuine products. Sometimes it is his "Ship of Ishtar," at others his "Dwellers in the Mirage," at still another time it is his great "The Moon Pool" that engrosses me. But just recently it was even finer "Face in the Abyss" (includes of course "The Snake Mother"), which was published in the October 1940 and November 1940 issues of F. F. M. and F. N.

Of all Merritt's incomparable tales I cannot but like this one best. It is of course essentially the ancient legend of Lucifer's rebellion—but the legend brought up to date by casting it in terms of modern fantasy. Merritt's mold changes it, presses it into completely new and highly original form—and makes it more gripping and convincing than ever. And Nimir is more powerful and convincing than even Milton's Lucifer. The Lord of Evil is easily the most powerful and evocative creation in modern fantasy.

To my mind this is the most evocative of all Merritt's tales—because of Nimir, if for no other reason.

I was held in complete thralldom by the Dark One. He was evil but he was splendid; quite against my will I sympathized with his struggle against the Snake Mother; true, his evil repulsed me at times, but his repulsion was never strong enough to overcome his attraction. I was never so absorbed as during his bargaining with Graydon by the Garden and later when Nicholas went to rescue Suarra. I felt strong resentment when Adana destroyed the Shadow in the chamber of the Face—felt what must have been a shadow at least of his own hate for the Serpent Woman because she had

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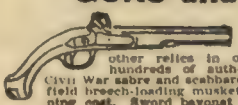

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foiled him. I couldn't help but hope he had been victorious. . . .

Ah—but the Dark One was strong and compelling and—drew one!

I would like to see a sequel to the Face in the Abyss. There were puzzling points not cleared up, and the Epilogue was especially evocative.

Graydon for instance seemed to have become an entirely new and powerful person—reckless and strong and increasingly conscious of his strength. It made me wonder, this change—it seemed somehow out of character . . . strange . . . unexplained.

Was Nimir destroyed? Definitely not! Regor had proclaimed that Nimir's essence was one with that of the other lords. *It* could not then be destroyed without his peers being destroyed, and the Lords of Fate and Folly were not destroyed. So one must accept that Nimir was not destroyed either.

Was the Shadow—merely a shadow? Only a weak emanation of thought-substance of the Evil One? And did the real essence of Nimir lie imprisoned in the Face? Well, even Adana grew convinced that it was otherwise. And she and the lords should have known. *And the Face was empty!* Remember?

I have a theory. Perhaps you will not agree. At the least it demonstrates the creative power of the Lord of Fantasy; not many tales can affect me powerfully enough to set me devising theories. . . .

My theory is this. Nimir was weak—knew himself to be too weak to overthrow Adana and the two lords. . . *knew* this, I say. Yet he must wage war against them in order to gain strength. . . . in order to overcome his weakness and perhaps protect himself. Knowing his weakness why then did he choose to provoke open, disadvantageous combat? And was that all that he did—or planned?

Ah-h-h. . . . I think not! He was far too wise. He would have—and did—devise the strategem of a double campaign! The coming of Graydon and his gaining of Suarra's love and the Snake Mother's approval, I think was exceedingly helpful to Nimir. The outlander solved the Dark One's problem—and Adana and the two lords missed this solution, even seemed to overlook its possibility. Perhaps it was too obvious.

Let us say that Nimir, knowing himself too weak to take Yu-Atlanchi from Adana and the lords in open campaign, drew now upon his subtlety—the Dark One was always the most subtle of the subtle, was he not . . . even more so than a woman? So he devised—and launched—not one but two campaigns! One of these, as with any good general, was a feint. This reached a climax in the assault on the Temple, and served its avowed purpose of detracting Adana's forces and diverting her attention.

The real campaign—or its objective—was to

secure time and opportunity to take possession of Graydon's body! For the body of the outlander offered a perfect refuge for Nimir, a refuge beyond the control of the snake woman and the other lords—beyond their control because they were not even aware of its possibility.

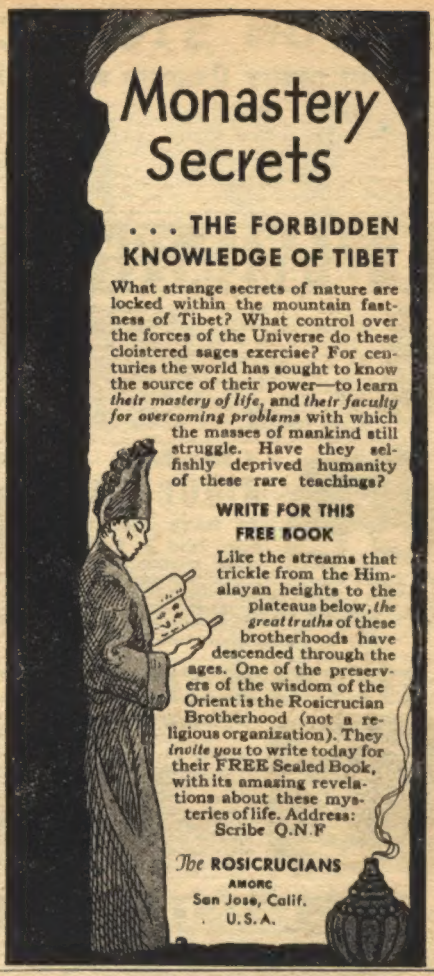
Adana was certain Nimir was going all out in open conflict and that if he lost his menace would be ended. She assured Graydon of this—in her reassurances to him about the collar that had been placed about his throat. So this was all she prepared for. And she was right, so far as she went in her thinking—but only if by some unexpected turn Nimir *had won* in the open conflict.

The Dark One was following the most logical and best method—trying to, anyway. And that method was to enter Graydon and lie low—conceal himself, so to speak. Bide his time! Do exactly what he had promised to do if the outlander lent him his body—not take it over immediately, before he was strong enough to conquer, but merely share it and prompt Graydon! Prompt the outlander, keeping himself concealed from Adana, till he was able to take over entirely with a good chance—if not a complete certainty—of winning.

Let us say now that the Shadow was and remained even after it became embodied at the Feast of the Dream-Makers a mere stage prop—a useful vehicle, perhaps even on occassions a necessary one. A vehicle that Nimir's essence occupied on enough occasions to convince Adana of its genuineness, but which could be converted into a mere shield formed of some emanation of thought or something else that was not the real essence of the Dark One. Thus, after Adana had once become convinced of its genuineness, it could be sacrificed at the last to make her certain that Nimir had been overthrown and, if not destroyed, at least rendered harmless. Even so Adana must have vaguely sensed at least something of this. For you will remember—and this is another strong evidence that Nimir was not destroyed—that the serpent woman solemnly warned Graydon to keep close watch on the Dream-Makers, saying that "great danger lurked there".

(Of course Nimir was essence of evil, and evil cannot be destroyed, but after all we are here dealing with a mere story in which evil is personified—we need not consider philosophy or theology.)

Finally everything was ready. Nimir launched his feint. It was beaten off—repulsed. Remained only to track the Shadow of Nimir down and destroy it. And the Shadow called Graydon to it—to the Chamber of the Black Throne, knowing full well (it must have known!) that Adana, flushed with victory, would follow the hapless outlander. And I believe the Shadow—or not the Shadow, but Nimir himself—wanted Adana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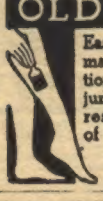

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to follow. I think what took place then was the real climax—and a successful one at that—in the Dark One's campaign.

Graydon led Adana and Tyldo to the Chamber of the Black Throne. The Shadow was there—oh, so very anxious to possess the outlander's body!

But he was foiled, and seizing Graydon's body he fled. The pursuit led into the chamber of the Face. The Shadow at last abandoned the prized body and sought to reenter the prison of the Face. This must have been most convincing evidence to Adana that it was really essence of Nimir! She set grimly about making it harmless.

Let us now suppose (and maybe Merritt could talk me out of it, I don't know) that Nimir seizes this moment when everybody's attention is diverted from Graydon, to take possession of the body. You'll remember that Kon, the spider-man, picked up the body, and Kon could have been easily deceived by the Master of Deceit. Anyway I believe that was what happened.

Adana returned to the Temple. She still was not sure, but Nimir produced certain indications that finally convinced her, and she removed the collar, certifying Graydon as safe—and at the same time certifying the Dark One's triumph. (One could almost hear the peeling of Luciferean laughter!)

The theory leaves us with Nimir sharing Graydon's body, beginning to quietly influence him with the Dark One's ideas about how Yu-Atlanchi should be rebuilt, and always growing stronger—bolder—more reckless—ever planning for ultimate complete seizure and rule of Yu-Atlanchi—the whole earth—and more!

. . . That's why I'd like to have a sequel.

I'd like to know if the Lord of Evil did conquer!

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